CLASSROOM
OF THE
ELITE
STORY BY
SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART BY
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
NOVEL
4.5

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 4.5

SAKURA AIRI

KARUIZAWA KEI

ICHINOSE HONAMI

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 4

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POSTSCRIPT

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Syougo Kinugasa

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Timothy MacKenzie
ADAPTATION: Jessica Cluess
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Rebecca Schneidereit, Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
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Chapter 1:
Summer Vacation is Nearly Over

Sazae-san syndrome. Have you heard that term before? Simply put, it's the depression that sinks in when you start watching *Sazae-san* on Sunday evening and realize that tomorrow is Monday. Students often feel similarly depressed near the end of summer vacation. They start saying things like, "I wish summer went on longer," or, "But I wanted more time to relax," and so on.

I don't agree. The years of your life when you can freely do what you want are essentially limited to the time when you're in school. If we suppose, for argument's sake, that you retired at sixty, the earliest possible age, and entered the workforce at eighteen, that would mean you worked for forty-two years—a significantly longer period than the twelve years between elementary school and graduating high school. During those forty-two years, society would restrict your freedoms. Some people even end up stuck working after they reach retirement age.

Of course, there are also people who live outside these restrictions. Some are born to rich parents, while others might have great entrepreneurial skill. Shortcuts to success do exist, but the chances of lucking into such a position are as slim as winning the lottery. In the end, most people spend more than half their lives continuously making sacrifices for society.

From a social perspective, simply being a student is like enjoying an endless summer vacation. However, many students become adults without appreciating this fact, only to look back on those times once they reach their thirties and forties and think of how much fun they had.

This is a selection of vignettes about students wavering in that space between childhood and adulthood.

Chapter 2:
Ibuki Mio has
Surprisingly Good Sense

"Special test." Those words would normally mean a written exam, or some kind of athletic trial. However, at the Advanced Nurturing High School, special tests weren't trivial affairs. A contest of survival on an uninhabited island. A battle of wits aboard a cruise ship. Those outlandish tests came one after another during our summer vacation.

Between the two tests, I, a mere first-year student, had only seven days of actual rest. That included today. Soon, the second semester would begin. I'd spent the days off rather simply. I didn't call anyone, and no one called me. In other words, it had been lonely.

"Well, I don't really care," I said aloud.

The freedom was enough. I wouldn't ask for more. Having too many friends wasn't necessarily a good thing.

The more people I connected with, the more troublesome it would become to manage all those relationships. If a friend called me, I might have been thoroughly overjoyed. But there was also a chance that I wouldn't have been.

Even alone, there were many things for me to do. I was doing one of those things today: using my phone to check my remaining point balance (106,219 points).

I transferred 100,000 of those points to someone from my class—Sudou Ken. Soon afterwards, Sudou called me.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. What are you doing right now?" he asked.

"Nothing much. Was just thinking about what to have for dinner."

"Gotcha. I just ate some chicken tenders a little while ago. Pretty basic stuff. Tastes all right, but I'd definitely get tired of them if I ate them too often, so I try to change things up a bit. I can fry

'em, boil 'em… Wait, what the hell am I talking about? I wanted to talk to you about fortune-telling."

Fortune-telling? I never expected those words to come out of Sudou's mouth. He was the sort of guy who saw the world in black and white. He liked simplicity, like the chicken he just ate.

"Truth is, I've heard there's this crazy-accurate fortune-teller over at the Keyaki Mall, but they're only gonna be there during summer vacation. I guess it's big among the seniors. Even when I'm doing club stuff, all anyone talks about is that fortune-teller. I got some extra cash, so I felt like having some fun, you know? Let's check it out together. My treat, of course."

The Keyaki Mall was a complex on the school grounds that students often went to. Because students were forced to live on the school grounds, the school was equipped with all sorts of facilities, although it couldn't give us all the options of the outside world. We didn't have idol concerts, amusement parks, or zoos. Our world was small. When something new cropped up, it naturally became a hot topic among the students.

Even so, fortune-telling was unexpected.

Since no one had invited me to hang out in a long, long time, I couldn't hide my happiness. "When are we going?"

"Tomorrow morning. Sounds like it starts at ten, but apparently, if you don't get in line early, you'll be waiting forever. I wanted to get there around 9:30," said Sudou. Apparently, he'd already planned out a schedule.

"I'm fine with that, since I don't have plans. But will your club be cool with it?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow's my day off. The tournament ended, so it's fine. Besides, we've done nothing but train our butts off. If they don't let us rest a little, our bodies will fall apart," he told me matter-of-factly.

Sudou had just played in a basketball tournament. Even though I saw him quietly practicing day after day in preparation, I was admittedly kind of curious about the tournament's results. One more thing to think about.

"Did you have any *trouble* at all?" I asked.

I made sure to stress the word “trouble.” Sudou understood what I was referring to.

“Yeah. It was pretty tough. I mean, they supervise you way more—you have the team captain and the coach watching you. It’s nothing like playing in junior high. I can’t open my mouth at all, except when we need to talk during a game. The school puts a ton of restrictions on us, even on bathroom breaks. I thought it was going to be impossible,” Sudou said.

Even though club activities were separate from coursework, the school rules were still strict.

“Anyway, it all worked out. I did pretty well, ’cause I got the chops,” he added.

“I see. Well, that’s a relief. What about Yamauchi?” I asked.

“I made sure to delete the data before heading back,” Sudou said, once again referring to our secret business. “I wouldn’t worry. I mean, even I’m not that dumb.”

Sudou’s school life rode on this. He probably wouldn’t do anything reckless. Even so, it might be a good idea to get in touch with Yamauchi later, to confirm that the data was successfully deleted. Just in case.

“By the way, did you actually get to play in the big game?” I asked.

“Yeah. I was the only one out of all the first years to play. I even scored. We still lost in the end, though, so I’m not exactly that proud.”

I didn’t really understand the intricacies, but a first-year student playing in a game like that seemed like a pretty big deal. I sensed acceptance, rather than frustration, from Sudou. He’d probably practiced hard for the tournament, and saw this as steadily making progress.

He had to have practiced hard, since the first-year students left the school grounds to participate in those special exams. That meant Sudou had had less time to practice than the older students.

“So, what are you gonna do? Fortune-telling—you gonna go or not?”

“Well, I don’t really have anything planned. So, sure, I’ll go.”

Now that I'd agreed, Sudou cut straight to the chase. "Definitely invite Suzune out, too. Definitely. Understand?" he said.

"I see," I answered.

Apparently, Sudou didn't actually want to go see the fortune teller with me, but rather, with Horikita. He probably knew that, if he invited her himself, his chances of success were rather slim.

"Well, it's just… I can't imagine that she's interested in fortune-telling," I added.

"Even so, invite her. This is like your one special skill, right?"

What kind of special skill? I really wish he'd quit trying to use me as some kind of Horikita Invitation Machine.

"Well, I'll give it a shot. But don't expect anything," I said.

"Giving it a shot isn't good enough," he answered.

"Not good enough?"

Sudou's emphatic words contained traces of anger. He seemed to plan on Horikita definitely being there tomorrow.

"You absolutely need to do it. If you don't invite Horikita out, there's no point," he told me.

"Look, I don't know what plans she might have tomorrow. And I don't know if she even has any interest in fortune-telling. Wouldn't it be easier to invite her to go shopping or check out a film festival?"

"There's nothing to worry about. All girls love fortune-telling," he answered.

That was an extremely broad generalization. I couldn't really imagine Horikita showing any curiosity about things that ordinary girls liked.

"Got it? Later, after you invite her, get in touch with me. Okay? You gotta."

With that, Sudou abruptly ended the call. I'd thought it was strange for Sudou to invite me to check out a fortune-teller. Well, it seemed as though he was really after Horikita. While I did feel a little disappointed, I needed to call Horikita right away. If Sudou found out later that I ignored his request, it would be a huge headache.

Horikita answered her phone immediately.

“Hey, Horikita. Do you like fortune-telling?” I asked.

If there was one woman in the whole world capable of destroying anyone’s preconceived notion that all girls liked fortune-telling, it was Horikita.

“You open conversations in the strangest way,” she answered.

True. But I didn’t really have anything else to say. “You’ll be saving me if you give me an answer.”

“So, if I don’t answer you, there’s a possibility that you won’t be saved?” she asked.

That was certainly a possibility. The image of Sudou putting me in a headlock stuck in my mind.

“So, are you going to save me?” I asked.

“If you’re comfortable owing me one,” she answered.

I’d have to owe her one *just* for answering a question? I was filled with the urge to hit the “end call” button, but I pictured Sudou’s angry face and resisted.

“Fine. If you answer me, I’ll owe you,” I told her.

Horikita, realizing her answer’s value, paused for a moment. “I see. Well, I’m not exactly an enthusiast or anything, but it would be a lie to say I dislike fortune-telling.”

This was unexpected. “Have you ever had your fortune told before?” I asked.

“Of course I haven’t. I’ve simply noticed horoscopes and such in the morning news.”

She was probably talking about the daily horoscope things that were usually based on your birth month. I had a hard time picturing Horikita as the type of girl who would go change her clothes, or buy new accessories, if someone on TV said her lucky colors were red and white.

“Are you addicted to getting your fortune told, by chance?” she asked.

“No, that’s not it. There’ve been some rumors going around lately about a fortune-teller. Have you heard?”

“A fortune-teller?” Horikita fell silent for a while, then eventually answered in a tone that sounded as though she understood. “Yes, there does seem to be quite the uproar. I’ve heard about it.”

“Well, I was a little curious. They say that the fortunes are really accurate, so I was wondering *how* accurate. But I can’t honestly imagine that something like fortune-telling would be so spot-on.”

I expected her to agree with me, but she apparently held a different opinion.

“Indeed? I think that someone with real power could be accurate.”

“No way. You’d have to be psychic,” I replied. The power to predict the future by reading a person’s face or hands, or based on their birthdate? That was ridiculous, and I didn’t believe it existed.

“No, that’s not what I mean. Fortune-tellers don’t have the power to divine the future. That’s obvious, isn’t it? That would be as foolish as someone saying that they believe in ghosts. However, the big difference between fortune-tellers and psychics is that fortune-tellers give readings based on a massive amount of past data. In other words, they interpret patterns to understand people.”

Horikita wasn’t a fanciful girl. Her answer was grounded in logic and reason.

“In other words, you’re talking about fortune-tellers’ ability to cold read, right?” I asked.

“You’re rather cheeky, but I guess you *do* know some things.” Horikita sounded slightly amused. “We can’t evaluate ourselves objectively. However, a good fortune-teller can extract information from the person they’re reading through a short conversation. They can pick up on things that the person themselves hasn’t noticed. Don’t you think so?”

Cold reading. Quite literally, that term meant reading someone’s mind without prior preparation. It referred to a technique which extracted information through casual conversation, and thus, gave the person being read the impression that you knew more than you did. You used observation and deduction to obtain information about your target, then made the person believe that

you could see their past and future. It sounded simple, but actually, being able to extract information without the mark noticing was incredibly difficult. It required a high degree of skill.

"I'm a little interested," I admitted.

"That's good. I think you should go," Horikita said.

"How about you come along?"

"Are you joking?"

"No, I'm quite serious."

"I refuse," she answered.

She'd shot me down instantly, but I couldn't just accept that. "I'm a total novice when it comes to fortune-telling. I thought it'd be good to have you along, Horikita, so I understand better."

"Sorry, but I'll pass. You know I don't enjoy dealing with crowds, right?"

That was certainly true. Fortune-telling was so popular, a lot of very excited students were bound to be there. Some adults from campus might go, too. I certainly couldn't imagine Horikita wanting to enter a crowded place like that.

If I pushed any further, I'd probably just end up souring Horikita's mood. As far as I was concerned, I'd received her message loud and clear. Sudou probably wouldn't be that big a problem, anyway. Probably.

After I ended the call, I shot him a brief message.
I immediately noticed the "read" marker pop up. Shortly afterward, I received a disgruntled reply.

"Then forget about it," the message read.

I existed only as a means for Sudou to invite Horikita. Since I'd failed to invite her, Sudou had no further use for me. Well, it probably would've been a little weird for two dudes to see a fortune-teller together.

"Even so… A fortune-teller, huh?" I murmured aloud.

After that conversation with Horikita, my interest was piqued. I decided to head over tomorrow and check the fortune-teller out.

2.1

Who in their right mind thought it'd be a good idea to go see a fortune-teller?

"I might have messed up," I muttered.

The intense late-August heat blazed down upon me. I saw a shimmering heat haze ahead, above the concrete, and through the roadside trees. The dorm rooms came equipped with air conditioning, so we didn't feel the heat much indoors. However, it *was* summer, and in direct sunlight, you instantly started sweating buckets.

The heat reduced people to complete lumps. I desperately sought out shade. Fortunately, the school boasted a rather expansive campus littered with tons of trees.

It was 9:30 A.M., well before most student activities, as I made my way towards the fabled fortune-teller. Fortune-telling services were supposed to begin at ten, but I didn't plan to stick around for long. I'd quickly get my fortune read, then leave just as quickly. That was my plan.

But, as I neared my destination, I realized that my plans were about to be shattered.

I expected Keyaki Mall to be nearly empty. Instead, numerous students lounged around in their summer clothes. I prayed that they weren't all there for the same reason I was, but I suspected they were. I decided to at least escape the blazing hellscape by entering the building, and started looking for the elevator, since the fortune-teller was on the fifth floor.

"Geh."

I let out a grumble. Nearly ten students were hanging around in front of the elevator. I wondered if any of them would understand my plight. Whenever I took elevators alone, I was the sort to push the "close" button repeatedly. I wasn't good at riding elevators with large groups of people my age. I'd need a great deal of courage to mingle with that crowd.

Although it'd be inconvenient, I decided to take a detour and get on a different elevator. Another elevator, across the way, was far less crowded.

"Calm down," I muttered.

Getting to the other elevator took more time and effort, but the peace of mind it brought me was a lifesaver. After I reached the fifth floor, I made my way toward the fortune-teller. However, an even more uncomfortable situation awaited me.

"There are couples everywhere."

Boys and girls stood in pairs all over. A number of them seemed to be in relationships. Of course, there were groups of only boys and only girls, but those were far fewer.

Seeing a fortune-teller about a couple's future and romantic compatibility was common, I supposed. However, it made this visit significantly more awkward than I'd anticipated. Not many people had come alone to have their fortune told. Single guys were fewer still.

In any case, a line was forming. I decided to queue up. When I did so, a woman scanning the area called out to me.

"Good morning. Will your partner be joining you later?" she asked.

"Partner? Uh, no, it's just me."

Of course, it wasn't exactly odd for her to ask me that question, but she'd put it rather strangely. I wished she'd be more sensitive to single people.

"Umm…" The line attendant looked at me with a sheepish expression. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid that, in order to have your fortune read today, you need a partner. So…"

"I can't have my fortune read if I'm alone?"

She gave a small nod and pointed at a written notice.

" *Guidance is for couples only. We humbly ask for your understanding* ."

I now saw why Sudou had insisted on inviting Horikita. He and Horikita would've had to line up together and talk to each other.

“That means he never wanted me along, from the very start,” I muttered.

Sudou’s behavior took on an entirely different meaning, now. He’d never really wanted to invite me. He probably would’ve found some excuse to send me packing once he had Horikita to himself. That was pretty sad.

“Out of curiosity, is the rule the same for the line next to me?” I asked.

“Yes. Ukon-sensei is only reading fortunes for couples,” the woman answered.

“I understand.”

I bowed my head and slipped out of the line. The students behind me advanced one step forward.

I couldn’t believe I’d fallen for something like this. I’d pictured a lone woman sitting on a street corner, being paid in small coins, but reality had other plans. Apparently, this sort of romantic divination was all the rage right now. I would’ve liked to try the fortune-teller’s services, but there was nothing I could really do. Trying to invite Horikita again would have been a waste of time.

I decided to just slink away quietly.

“Huh? So, I can’t have my fortune read alone?”

I heard an angry voice. Another victim of singleness was apparently standing in the next line. Feeling somewhat sympathetic, I glanced over. Unfortunately, I caught that person’s eye.

“Ah.”

It was Ibuki Mio, a Class C student. When I pretended I hadn’t seen her, she chased after me. I quickened my pace.

“Wait!” Perhaps Ibuki thought that I was trying to run away (which I certainly was). She grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Do you want something?” I asked.

“Where’s Horikita?”

She looked around as she asked this. Ibuki was sort of like Sudou; she saw me as little more than a Horikita whisperer. I wished she’d just go see Horikita directly and not involve me.

“It’s not like I’m with her all the time or anything. I’m alone today,” I said.

“Ah, I see.”

During the deserted island test, Ibuki had been sent to infiltrate Class D. Her mission was to spy on us and stir up chaos, and she and Horikita ended up trading blows in a fistfight. Since then, Ibuki had been rather hostile toward Horikita. She probably considered them archenemies.

Although Ibuki was her usual crabby, unsociable self, she had pretty good fashion sense. She looked great. With a slightly different attitude, she could have been popular.

“Fortune-telling is usually something you do one-on-one, isn’t it? I really didn’t expect this at all. Don’t you agree?” she asked.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought, anyway.”

“So, are you going to invite Horikita or something?”

First Sudou, now Ibuki. It seemed like Horikita was the sole topic of conversation whenever I was involved.

“No, I’m not. If you want to talk to Horikita, why don’t you reach out to her yourself? Try telling her that you want to go have your fortunes read together.”

“Huh? Absolutely not. It’s not like I have anything to talk to her about.”

If that’s true, then I really wish you’d stop bringing her up.

“I wasn’t really that interested in having my fortune read in the first place, so I’m fine. How about you?” I asked.

“I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t annoyed, but…” Ibuki shook her head in frustration. “Well, I don’t really have any choice but to give up. I’m bad at making conversation, anyway.”

That answer sounded fishy. Ibuki said she was bad at conversation, but unlike Sakura, she had never struck me as a person who struggled with that kind of thing. In fact, she seemed comfortable talking to me on equal terms—or comfortable being condescending, at least.

“You could invite Ryuuen,” I offered.

I said that half-jokingly, but Ibuki shot me a scornful glare packed with disgust. “You’re joking, right? I hate seeing his face, even when I have to. I’d rather avoid him during my holidays.”

“But you were always together back on the ship, weren’t you? Isn’t it normal to think that you two might be close?” I pointed out.

Ibuki looked away. “That was because it was my fault that I didn’t discover Class D’s leader,” she answered quietly.

If that were true, Ibuki had only been working with Ryuuen to atone for her failure. That didn’t explain everything, but I supposed only Class C knew the real reason. That said, Ibuki *had* learned our leader’s identity during the survival challenge on the island. She discovered that Horikita was the leader, and she hadn’t been wrong. She would have contributed significantly to her class if I hadn’t thwarted her.

“I wanted to ask. During the survival test, who was Class D’s leader?”

“Who knows?” I shrugged.

“‘Who knows?’ It’s not like you don’t know.”

“Even if I did, I couldn’t tell you. Honestly, I don’t know. Most of us in Class D have no idea. I think Horikita acted in secret, and somehow managed to pull everything off on her own. That’s the only way I can explain what happened.”

Ibuki seemed to look right through me. However, I wasn’t the sort of person to be easily exposed.

“If Ryuuen’s not an option, why don’t you invite a girl from your class? I’m sure you must have a friend or two,” I said.

“If I did, I wouldn’t be in this situation. I absolutely despise the girls in my class,” she answered.

Ibuki was just like Horikita. Actually, she was probably even more antisocial than Horikita. With the right opportunity, the two might get along.

“You know, you’re making conversation with me just fine right now. Shouldn’t you be able to talk to anyone else, too? I don’t think you’re bad at dealing with people,” I said.

“That’s not true. When you talk to me, you feel something, don’t you? I’m all prickly.”

“Well, yeah. I guess so.” Interacting with Ibuki always made me feel like meat being sliced by a sharp knife. That was the closest I could come to describing her desire for isolation. I’m sure other students felt the same way.

“No matter what I do, the mood always seems to turn sour. Understand?” she asked.

I still had my doubts about Ibuki actually being bad at making conversation, but she was undoubtedly standoffish, even with her own classmates. I could imagine her headstrong attitude challenging the fortune-teller.

“If you’re bad at communicating, I’m surprised you’d want to get your fortune read.”

“That’s the problem. I’m like someone who loves cats, but has an allergy,” she answered.

That certainly sounded frustrating. “But you did really well spying on Class D,” I replied.

Crabby and unsociable as she might be, Ibuki hadn’t seemed at all disagreeable while she was working as a spy. Our class had accepted her without suspicion.

“That’s different. In any case, talking to people makes me anxious. And when I’m anxious, it puts me on edge. I hate it. It’s not like I *want* to be this way—wait, why am I even telling *you* this? People might get the wrong impression about us!”

Flustered, Ibuki abruptly turned away. Really, that should've been my line. Everyone who'd been queueing near us had moved ahead, and it was just the two of us. The other students might easily have misinterpreted that.

So, talking to people made Ibuki anxious, huh? If that were true, the solution might be unexpectedly easy. Even if I didn't know the root cause of her anxiety, I could work with this.

"Earlier, you said that being a spy was different, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yeah. Because it's a fact."

"What's the difference between then and now?"

Ibuki fell silent for a little while. "I don't know. It's just different," she said finally. It seemed like she'd given up on trying to articulate the difference.

"You haven't given it much thought," I said.

"Well, it's not like I can explain why they're different. I was just acting."

"No, I think it's simple. The difference between you now, and you then, is awareness."

"Awareness?" Ibuki turned toward me, her interest slightly piqued.

"Your anxiety comes from being hyper-aware of situations. You project your insecurities onto others, so you freeze up when you meet someone for the first time," I explained.

"What are you talking about? I mean, maybe it's different for people who are good at communicating, but pretty much everyone gets nervous when they meet someone for the first time, don't they?"

"Of course. I'm the same way. But would you still feel nervous if you were talking to the clerk at a convenience store?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"The clerk at a convenience store you visit often. 'Do you have a point card? Would you like that warmed up?' You don't get anxious when the clerk asks you those questions, right?"

"Well, th-that's…" she stammered.

If you thought of communication as a skill, like athleticism, it was simple. You had to train your talents. Ibuki got nervous because she was acutely aware of who she was talking to . *I wonder what they think of me. I want them to like me. I hope they're a good person.*

When Ibuki infiltrated Class D, she probably didn't have time to consider those things. She was playing a part, not thinking about how people would react to her real self. And she usually gave off an outcast vibe anyway, which worked as the perfect disguise.

"I suppose, when you put it that way, you have a point," she muttered.

"You were ready to talk to the fortune-teller face-to-face. It's natural to feel anxious, but there's no reason to. If you don't think about communication too hard, that should relieve some of the tension."

"I see. Wait, why the hell are *you* lecturing me?" Ibuki glared, looking ready to pounce.

"When you've been a loner for a long time, you understand these kinds of things. You wonder why you can't make friends, and you think about the differences between the people who make you nervous and those who don't. Finally, you think about where people come from and where they're going."

"You're creepy. You seem like the sort who'll turn out to be a mass murderer later in life. Were you always like this?" Ibuki asked.

"More or less."

Things had veered into rather awkward territory. I probably came across as a weirdo.

"Well, I'm heading back. How about you?" I asked.

"I'll probably head back, too. I can have my fortune read alone, anyway. I was really interested in *tenchuusatsu* , though," she said.

" *Tenchuusatsu* ?"

That wasn't exactly the kind of word you heard all that often.

"Wait. You came without even knowing what that is?" Ibuki sighed in exasperation. "Put simply, it's a type of fortune-telling

that tells you what times are unlucky for you."

Was it really possible to pinpoint an aspect of someone's destiny like that? My knowledge of fortune-telling was limited to superstitions like "wear the color red," and "be careful not to lose something this month." However, Ibuki made it sound like there was far more to fortune-telling.

"That's why I came. Fortune-telling isn't all about romance and such." Ibuki sounded disappointed as she looked back at the long line.

"Maybe some of them came here to check out *tenchuusatsu* , or whatever it's called," I replied.

"Even so, I get the feeling that the romance stuff is what they're after, since the fortune-teller is forcing us to visit in pairs," she replied.

And with that, Ibuki left.

2.2

After I returned to my dorm room, I did some research into *tenchuusatsu* . It was an incredibly deep subject. Before 1980, *tenchuusatsu* had been something of a hot topic worldwide. However, as its popularity boomed, people started to doubt its credibility. There was a news story about a famous fortune-teller who was forced to retire after he dropped *tenchuusatsu* .

Fortune-telling might have some value, even if depending too much on it was bad. From a true believer's perspective, it probably seemed fairly accurate.

With that thought in mind, curiosity overcame me. Yet I couldn't believe what I read online. It was impossible to divine the future. I wanted to try *tenchuusatsu* out for myself, to see if it was a lie. I wanted what the fortune-teller was doing to be simply an extension of cold reading.

"I wonder if *tenchuusatsu* is only being offered this month?" I muttered.

Apparently, the fortune-teller's crew was leaving when summer vacation ended. There was no information on whether they'd return. A fortune-teller might never visit this school again.

I didn't have anyone to invite. I was completely out of options. Horikita would just turn me down if I asked, and I didn't have the courage to invite Kushida. I felt like Sakura would probably come with me, but if I brought her to a place positively teeming with couples, it'd make her uncomfortable. After that were the guys, like Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi, but they probably didn't want to spend their few precious remaining days of summer vacation getting their fortunes read with another dude.

"I'm stuck, huh?"

Besides, I didn't like this couples-only requirement. Ibuki and I agreed on that. It seemed like a huge turn-off for people with a genuine interest in fortune-telling. I gave up and stopped my online research.

2.3

The day after I'd given up, though, I found myself moving toward the fortune-teller again.

"Ah."

Yet another bizarre meeting; fate had reunited me with Ibuki. We happened upon the same place at the exact same time.

"Why did you come here again? And by yourself?" Ibuki looked disgusted. I got the impression that I thoroughly repulsed her.

"I could ask you the same question," I countered.

"Well, I said that I like fortune-telling, didn't I? I thought maybe I could have my fortune read, even if I'm alone," she replied.

So, Ibuki came here hoping the rules had changed since yesterday. I wondered if she really *did* like fortune-telling that much, and if so, which part.

"I'm going to ask you something directly. Ibuki, do you believe in fortune-telling?" I asked.

"Are you saying I shouldn't?"

"No. But it's generally not something people start to believe in all of a sudden, right?"

Not everyone understood that fortune-telling was the mere application of techniques such as cold reading. Many genuinely believed in divination's mysterious power.

"I suppose a lot of people start out thinking that way. But if you can't move past that, fortune-telling's probably not for you," Ibuki said.

"So, you're saying that nonbelievers aren't qualified to have their fortunes read?"

"No, that's not it. Let me put it this way. It's not like I believe in fortune-telling unconditionally. However, people who are overly skeptical from the very start won't get anything out of it. People

who make fun of fortune-telling often lead lives riddled with contradictions themselves. They'll say they don't believe in kami or in Buddha, for instance—but when they're in trouble, they call on a higher power for help, don't they?"

That was a good argument. Gods didn't exist, and neither did things like ghosts. Yet many who made caustic statements like "God doesn't exist" would still visit shrines to bring in good fortune for the New Year. They'd pray for freedom from disease, success in business, or fulfillment in love. They'd clasp their hands and say, "Please, Kami-sama, listen to my prayers."

What you believed in and what you wished for were infinitely different, and no one could deny that.

That said, fortune-telling wasn't the same as the existence of a higher power. Fortune-tellers were just people, like you or me. Really, I couldn't help but be skeptical.

"Do you understand?" Ibuki asked.

"Yeah."

I still had lingering doubts, but I got the gist. I decided to make a suggestion.

"The fortune-teller only offers readings to pairs, but they're not only reading for romance, right?" I asked.

"Yes, obviously."

"In that case, why don't we go together? We're both genuinely interested in fortune-telling. If we're not in a relationship that might have future complications, I don't think we have anything to worry about."

I honestly felt absolutely nothing for Ibuki. My emotions were a flat line, neither good nor bad. It was like dealing with a first-time customer in a store.

"Well, I don't mind. I would like to have my fortune read, after all. Are you okay with this?" she asked.

"Even if Horikita were here, she's only a friend."

"That's not what I meant. Some students still hold a bit of a grudge toward me because of what happened on the island."

Ibuki was looking out for me, in a way. She was worried that,

if my classmates saw us together, they might resent me.

"I don't think you really need to worry about that."

Ibuki craned her neck like she was puzzled. "I don't understand."

"If everyone at this school got along, then yes, what you did would be considered a massive moral violation. However, the school believes that ability is everything. Besides, the classes were competing against one another. Spying and sabotage were natural tactics to employ under the circumstances. Am I wrong?"

"But a lot of people operate based on feelings, rather than logic, and they won't be convinced of that. Not everyone's quite as mentally flexible."

"I don't think people like that would be admitted to this school in the first place."

Ibuki crossed her arms and looked deep in thought for a moment. "You're surprisingly shameless, aren't you?"

"All I am is an unremarkable student. I have no interest in either trying to crawl my way up the ladder or being kicked off it. If working with a student like Horikita lets me coast by, then I'm lucky."

"That's not uncommon, though. Every student in this school has their eye on the special privileges that come with graduation. But no one foresaw that the school would make us compete like this, so I'm sure most students are bewildered."

Apparently, Class C students weren't really that different from Class D. That probably meant that Ibuki, who'd caught Ryuuen's eye early on, must be formidable. In fact, after her identity as the spy was discovered, Ibuki was at Ryuuen's side on several occasions. She said that she was only helping him to make up for her failure, but it seemed like he trusted her, at least to some degree.

Ibuki and I both got in line. The clerk I'd run into the other day came by once again to confirm that we were a pair, then handed us tickets. There were eight couples ahead of us.

"Looks like we'll be waiting for a while," I sighed.

If only one fortune-teller was available, Ibuki and I would

have to wait longer than an hour, even if they managed the time efficiently. How would the two of us endure that? I probably couldn't carry on a conversation for that long.

"We're only together to have our fortunes read, so we don't really need to make pointless chit-chat, right?" Ibuki asked me.

"I guess you have a point," I answered.

She'd picked up on what I was thinking. Good. I'd been saved a lot of hassle.

2.4

"Next, please."

It was the middle of the afternoon when I heard that small voice come out of the temporary tent.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting."

In the end, fortune-telling for each pair took approximately fifteen minutes, which forced Ibuki and me to stand in line for even longer than anticipated. Just as I started to wonder if I even cared about fortune-telling anymore, I passed through a curtain and entered the room where the fortune-teller waited.

When I entered, I found a chamber that looked like something out of a television show. It was dark inside, probably around 30 lux. The fortune-teller appeared to be an elderly woman, but a hood obscured her face, so I couldn't make out her expression. She sat with a thick book, the contents of which I couldn't guess, and some kind of crystal ball. It looked like one of those balls you chuck around in the hammer throw in track and field.

This was excellent atmosphere.

The crystal ball immediately began to glow, as if it would reflect my and Ibuki's futures. There were two backless seats in front of the fortune-teller. When we sat down, the fortune-teller chuckled lightly and moved her right hand.

"First…you must pay," she commanded.

She pulled out a small card reader from under the table and placed it before us. Such a product of modern civilization felt out of place, especially in contrast to the scene around me. Not that I expected the reading to be free, of course.

"What kind of fortune are you going to read?" asked Ibuki, presenting her student ID card.

"It can be about your academics, career, love life, or anything you like," the fortune-teller answered with an unsettling grin. The expression lent itself nicely to the atmosphere, but she seemed less

like a fortune-teller, and more like a witch.

The list of prices she showed us seemed oddly mismatched. They were separated into several categories. The “Basic Plan” package seemed to include the services the fortune-teller had already mentioned. There were several packages, one of which seemed to be related to *tenchuusatsu* . There were even options that let you see the end of your life. Of course, since this was a couples’ activity, many options were related to romance.

I wondered what a couple would do if the fortune-teller divined that they had poor romantic compatibility. Regardless, every option was rather expensive. We’d be spending well over 5,000 points.

“It’s a lot of money,” I sighed.

For a Class D student like me, who struggled with points daily, this was a tough pill to swallow. Even so, it probably would’ve been pointless to go home without finding out more about *tenchuusatsu* . I could just listen to Ibuki’s fortune and head back, but then I wouldn’t know how reliable the fortune-teller was.

Just in case, I checked my private points balance on my phone. I had roughly 6,000 points remaining: barely enough.

“I’ll do the Basic Plan,” said Ibuki.

Despite her unexpected interest in fortune-telling, she didn’t seem to want a detailed fortune.

“And you?” asked the fortune-teller.

“I’ll take the same,” I replied.

It felt as though I was placing an order at a restaurant. I presented my student ID card, and the card reader beeped, indicating that it had deducted points.

“Very well, let’s start with the young lady. What’s your name?”

“Ibuki. Ibuki Mio,” she answered flatly.

“When I tell fortunes, I see the face, the hand, and then the heart of the person I’m reading. I may see something that you won’t like. Are you prepared for that?” asked the fortune-teller.

“Do whatever you want,” Ibuki replied.

I saw a bit of the fortune-teller's wrinkled skin under her hood, along with the sharp gleam in her eye. She instructed Ibuki to extend both hands, then revealed her fortune.

"First, a palm reading. You have a long lifeline. You have a long, long life to look forward to. I cannot see you suffering any major illness so far," the fortune-teller began.

A typical start. I couldn't imagine that a person could divine such things just by looking at the lines on someone's palm. Maybe the fortune-teller based her readings off personal experiences?

If it were me, I'd simply base my answer on the customer's apparent health. I'd come to a conclusion based on their complexion, build, and so on.

But the fortune-teller continued her reading at length, carefully providing Ibuki with predictions about academics, financial success, love, and so on. The predictions sounded ordinary and innocuous to me, but Ibuki listened with seeming satisfaction. The fortune-teller didn't have anything particularly negative to say. Most of her predictions were of a bright future. She occasionally issued warnings, but they didn't seem to pose a significant threat.

"Thank you very much," said Ibuki. She bowed her head gratefully.

It now seemed to be my turn, a chance for me to understand this fortune-telling business.

The fortune-teller followed the same process she'd used with Ibuki, and the answers I received were largely indistinguishable from Ibuki's. Things seemed fundamentally good, but the fortune-teller said that there would be a future time when I would need to be careful to avoid disaster.

"I see… It seems that you had a harsh childhood," she continued.

A rather broad statement. Most people would claim to have gone through one or two harsh experiences during their youth, especially boys. I wanted her to give me more concrete answers. More importantly, I found it mysterious that a fortune-teller, who should have been divining the future, was instead talking about the past.

Ibuki sat without once interrupting, or even yawning, and listened intently. Perhaps this was what fortune-telling was supposed to be like. Or perhaps this was a necessary ritual? Maybe the fortune-teller needed to visit the past first.

Humans were creatures of convenience. Once people got the idea into their heads that they'd been promised "good luck," they freely interpreted the next thing that went their way as a sign of their fortune coming true. *Ah, so my fortune was right,* they would think. However, the reality was that everyone had "good luck" at some point, because life delivered both happiness and unhappiness in great and small amounts.

"This is…" The fortune-teller stopped moving her hands. "You're the holder of the fate *tenchuusatsu* !" she exclaimed.

"Wha—? Seriously?" Ibuki balked.

Even though it was my fortune, I was the least surprised person there. *Tenchuusatsu* wasn't a word I'd even been aware of until the day before. The fortune-teller and Ibuki seemed way more shocked by this revelation.

"To put it simply, you've lived a life of constant misfortune since you were born," Ibuki explained.

"This is incredible!" the fortune-teller exclaimed.

It might have been pure coincidence, but that claim was accurate. Still vague, though. Besides, from a cynical viewpoint, more than a few people would call themselves constantly unlucky. I supposed it *was* risky for the fortune-teller to make an unhappy prediction, though.

"So, is this fate *tenchuusatsu* going to apply to me from here on out?" I asked.

"The little girl wasn't quite right when she said that the *tenchuusatsu* meant you lived a life of misfortune," the fortune-teller replied.

"Little girl?" Ibuki repeated, annoyed.

"Fate *tenchuusatsu* is certainly rare. However, that doesn't necessarily mean that your entire life will be marked by misfortune. It's true that the overall outlook is bad. There are negatives: you won't have the blessing of your parents, or your family. However,

the rest is up to you, individually. You alone decide what you can do and can't do," the fortune-teller explained.

She had a grim expression on her face, but I could see compassion in her eyes.

"You don't need to be pessimistic, and you don't need to act like you're starring in a comedy, either," she continued.

I'd heard some interesting things today, but in the end, it was just fortune-telling. I wasn't on the edge of my seat with anticipation. When I tried to get up, though, the fortune-teller stopped me.

"I have one more piece of advice for you. Go straight home, without taking any detours. If you stray, you might be stuck for quite a long time. Even if you do get stuck, don't panic. If you stay calm and work together, you should be able to overcome it," she told me.

What prophetic words.

2.5

"So, how was your first fortune-telling experience?" Ibuki asked.

"How was yours?"

"I was mostly satisfied, I think. That fortune-teller is actually pretty famous. People say that she's highly accurate."

"I see. It seems like a simple profession, but I guess it's actually difficult," I replied.

Fortune-telling was partly based on templates. A fortune-teller gave you hastily thrown together generalizations, but also bits of truth, calculated to excite the listener. They didn't just rely on luck, but also on long practice and experience.

"I'm not going to dismiss fortune-telling from now on," I added.

"Ah, I see."

Ibuki's reply was short, disinterested. We headed toward the elevator.

"Geh. It's really crowded again," I grumbled.

If I continued onwards, I faced hell. If I turned back, I faced hell. Students crowded the elevator area.

"Sorry, but I think I'm going to find another way home. I'll take a detour," I told Ibuki.

"Yeah, me too."

As we made our way to the other elevator, I remembered what the fortune-teller had said.

"That reminds me, earlier…"

"The fortune-teller said not to take any detours," Ibuki said.

My eyes met Ibuki's for an instant. Whether it was coincidence, or an inevitability, we decided to take the detour.

"Well, this might be interesting. Let's see how accurate her

prediction was," I mused.

We arrived at the elevator without incident. No one else was around when we hit the button to call the car.

"Is the first floor okay?"

"Yeah," Ibuki said.

It seemed as though our paths would soon diverge. I pushed the button for the first floor. The elevator doors closed, and the car began to move. Since Ibuki and I had nothing else to talk about, we rode in silence.

However, as the third-floor light blinked on, the elevator made a heavy grinding noise, then stopped.

It didn't seem like we'd paused because someone had called the elevator on the third floor; it seemed more like the elevator had ground to a halt. The lights went out, and for an instant, everything was pitch black before the emergency lights came on.

"Is it a power outage?" asked Ibuki.

"Seems that way," I replied. If this was what the fortune-teller meant about getting stuck, then she was right on the money.

"Shouldn't we use the emergency phone?"

There was no need to panic. The elevator had measures in place in the event of a breakdown. There were surveillance cameras inside the car, and an intercom button connected to an emergency dispatch center. Ibuki leaned against the back wall of the elevator. Although I wasn't really good at talking to people, I decided to push the call button.

However…

"There's no response," I said.

I didn't know whether the phone on the other end was ringing or not, but I saw no indication that we were connecting to anyone at the emergency dispatch center.

"Is the call not going through because of the power outage?" Ibuki asked.

"No. Elevators normally have a backup battery that lasts for several hours. The fact that the emergency lights are on right now is proof of that battery. I think this means there's some other internal

failure.”

I pushed the button meant for the hearing-impaired, but got no response from that, either. Perhaps the control panel itself was dead. The battery was alive, though, and the air conditioning was working. That was a lifesaver, but what were we supposed to do?

“Can you try calling the school from your phone? We should be in range,” I said.

“I’m sorry, but would you do it?” she asked.

“I know you don’t want to talk to other people, but can’t you do that much?”

“Ugh,” she muttered.

With a disgruntled look, Ibuki pulled out her phone. When she looked at it, her expression immediately worsened. She showed her screen to me. A message said that the battery was low. Immediately afterwards, it died.

“I don’t have anyone to talk to, so I don’t usually notice when my battery is about to die. You do it,” Ibuki grumbled.

“Guess I got no choice,” I replied.

I pulled out my phone. Once I saw my screen, I stiffened.

“Hurry up already,” Ibuki urged.

“Apparently, our situation is far more serious than I originally thought.”

My phone’s battery was at only 4 percent. It was like a flickering candle flame that the wind could extinguish at any moment.

“You’re messing with me,” Ibuki growled.

“I’m the same as you. Since I don’t have a lot of people to talk to, I don’t really bother checking my battery life.”

“You’re such a useless man.”

“You know, you’re being kind of mean, even though we’re both in the exact same position. Okay, where to call now?”

I looked around to see if I could find contact information for emergency services, and discovered a ten-digit number near the button panel. However, thanks to some jerk who probably thought

they were hilarious, the last four digits were scribbled over with magic marker.

"A prank like this is evil," I muttered.

"Why don't you call someone you know?" Ibuki asked.

"Someone I know, huh?" Who would I call? "Maybe Horikita?"

"Rejected," she countered.

"I thought you'd say that."

"If you call her, then that would mean she'd come to save us, right? Don't make me laugh."

I didn't think it really mattered who rescued us, though. Besides, it wasn't as though Ibuki were somehow responsible for this. The elevator simply broke down. There was no reason for her to worry; maybe she just didn't like the idea of showing weakness in front of her rival.

"You don't want things to get messy?" I guessed. Ibuki nodded slightly.

So, we needed someone who would come to our rescue without causing a scene, huh? That meant those three idiots were out of the question. They'd make a huge deal out of this, and probably tell everyone afterward. Sakura wouldn't gossip, but the situation would probably fluster her. It'd be difficult for her to help us out.

Kushida and Karuizawa were probably likewise unsuited to the task. Someone who would come help without causing any issues? The one person we could rely on was…that guy.

"I'll respect your wishes, but let me choose the person we contact," I said.

"As long as it's not Horikita."

I called him right away. After the phone rang for a few seconds, the taciturn fellow quietly answered. I explained our situation and asked for help. However, not long after I started talking, my phone died. The screen silently faded to black.

"Battery ran out," I told Ibuki.

"Did he get the message?"

“Probably.”

The only thing left to do was sit and wait. There was no need to panic—someone would definitely notice us before too long. If we tried to escape the elevator, like in a TV drama or movie, we’d just risk getting hurt.

Then, though, the situation evolved in an unexpected direction. I heard what sounded like loud grinding inside the elevator. The pleasantly cool air emanating from the vent stopped.

“No way,” Ibuki groaned.

She finally began to look upset. We were trapped in an enclosed space in the middle of summer. The temperature would likely rise dramatically. The air had only gotten a little warmer for now, but soon, we’d be sweating.

“Can we possibly escape on our own?” Ibuki asked.

“Looks like there’s an emergency hatch, but…”

Fewer elevators seemed to have hatches nowadays, but there was a square panel on the ceiling. You saw that kind of thing often in the movies, but in reality, it was unusual.

“How are we supposed to get that open?” asked Ibuki.

You couldn’t normally open the escape hatch from the inside. It was there as a last resort, so that rescuers could still enter and get people out when the elevator doors broke. The hatch was probably kept locked from the outside, except during routine inspections.

“I think we should wait. In an emergency situation in an elevator, the golden rule is to just wait it out.” That was the safest and surest path.

“If you can deal with being in a sauna, sure,” snapped Ibuki.

While we snarked at each other, the temperature continued to rise. I understood wanting to get out, but I also wanted to avoid poor decisions. I took off my jacket and sat on the floor. At times like this, it was important to remain calm.

“How about you sit, too? If it’s too hot, take off some clothes,” I offered.

“Huh? You can’t possibly be thinking something sleazy in this situation. Are you?” Ibuki asked. She’d interpreted my words in a

different way than I intended.

"I heard you kept up with Horikita. There's no way I could defeat someone like you in combat," I told her.

"Well, that's true, but…"

"Of course, I'll turn around if you undress. Relax," I said.

"I'm not taking my clothes off!" she snapped.

Ibuki quickly sat down with a thud.

We waited quietly for about thirty minutes, but still hadn't heard from anyone.

"This isn't good," I muttered. Ibuki's breathing grew ragged.

Sweat poured down our foreheads and dripped from our hair. My shirt was so soaked that it looked like I had stood under a waterfall. The situation had gotten significantly more dangerous than I previously imagined. This elevator was installed into the Keyaki Mall's external wall. I hadn't noticed that before, because of the air conditioning, but it would get extremely hot under these conditions.

Children have died after being stuck in locked cars in the middle of summer, and the same danger can apply to adults, too. It felt like the two of us were about to suffer heatstroke.

"I can't take it anymore! Move!" Ibuki shouted.

She shot up and kicked the elevator wall with all of her might, leaving a dent. She kicked the same place again. The elevator wobbled slightly, but showed no sign of actually moving.

"You're just wasting your energy. I can't say sitting here doing nothing's the safest option anymore either, though," I muttered.

Even if someone outside had noticed the malfunctioning elevator soon after it stopped, the rescue crew would take roughly thirty minutes to arrive. Help might be here any minute, but if we remained stuck much longer, heatstroke would be inevitable. Our lives might be in danger.

"Guess we've got no choice," I muttered.

I wasn't about to roast to death in an elevator sauna.

"Should we kick down the door? Hey, should we kick it

down?" Ibuki was quickly going berserk.

"Let's try to open the hatch on top," I suggested. The most important thing was to make an opening, even if we couldn't escape through it. "The ceiling is about two meters up. Probably like 2.2 or 2.3…"

Even if I stretched as far as I could, I couldn't reach that high.

"Move," Ibuki snapped.

Ibuki leaped upwards directly beneath the hatch. It was an incredible jump. She reached up and pushed with all her might, but the hatch didn't budge in the slightest. When she landed, the shock made the elevator wobble wildly.

"Looks like it's stuck," she said.

"Guess so."

"Well, you predicted that it was locked, but how's it locked? What's the mechanism?"

"I think it's secured with a padlock, but if so, what do we do?" I honestly didn't have any idea.

"I'll kick it."

"No. That's definitely impossible," I said.

Ibuki might've been extremely confident in her strength, but this elevator wasn't something that you could simply kick open.

"That's an emergency hatch, right? That means rescuers need to be able to open the elevator from the outside. If we look at it from that perspective, the amount of force needed should be minimal," she replied.

I got what Ibuki was saying, but the situation wasn't that simple. Besides, since the hatch was located on the ceiling, it was going to be hard to kick.

"We won't know if we don't try," Ibuki continued. She started looking at the elevator walls. She wasn't planning to kick off the wall and launch herself, was she?

"Wow. So, I guess the fortune-teller's warning really did come true, didn't it?" I asked.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

“The old woman told me not to panic if I get stuck. She told me to cooperate.” I turned my gaze to the elevator buttons. “The emergency button didn’t respond, and the call didn’t connect. But what about the other buttons?”

Since the first-floor button was lit, the battery was probably still alive. I tried pushing the second-floor button as a test, and it lit up. This was worth a shot. I started pushing buttons at random.

“It’s pointless,” Ibuki rebuked me. “We don’t have any other choice but to kick our way out, right?”

“No, there’s another way. Elevators have something like a cancel command function, don’t they?”

I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about elevators, but I’d picked up a few things. There was a way to cancel a command after you pushed a button for the wrong floor by mistake. The command differed, based on the elevator manufacturer, but if you kept pushing the cancel button, that could stop the elevator.

When I continued to push the button for the second floor, the light went off.

“There should be some commands in express mode, for sure,” I muttered.

“Express?”

“Say we were on the third floor. If we headed down to the first floor, the elevator would normally stop on the second, if people on that floor hit the call button. However, if you use the express command, the elevator ignores other commands and takes you directly to the first floor.”

I didn’t know whether this elevator had an express mode, though.

“Is it worth giving it a try?” Ibuki asked.

“Well, it’s better than trying to break through the ceiling.”

In truth, I didn’t think I would get the elevator moving by using the express mode. I wanted to buy time by changing the subject, and by giving Ibuki renewed hope. She was on the verge of losing her cool.

“Help me think this through. If we both come up with ideas,

we might stumble onto a solution," I suggested.

I tried pushing the button for the first floor repeatedly, simultaneously pushing the buttons for all the other floors. No matter what I did, however, the elevator didn't respond.

"Let me try."

"Okay."

Ibuki started pushing various buttons. We would really need a plan in the event that help wasn't coming. Maybe kicking down the door was actually worth considering. Even if we couldn't break it open completely, an opening big enough to slip through would be adequate.

I'd have preferred to get out of the elevator without resorting to violent behavior, but as long as we could escape, I didn't really care about the means.

"I don't really know about canceling commands, but I can't imagine you'd be able to activate the elevator's express mode just by punching a combination of buttons. Right?" Ibuki said.

That seemed obvious. Children mash elevator buttons at random all the time, and an elevator in express mode would also be pretty inconvenient for other passengers. We likely couldn't activate that mode through a typical combination of buttons.

"In that case, it might be better to exclude complex commands," I said.

Let's say that, to use express mode, you had to enter one, six, five, five, four, two, four, and then your destination. That would be difficult to memorize, and would have a height requirement of at least six floors. A code like that would be odd if your elevator only covered three floors.

"We should try pushing the emergency button, don't you think? So, then…one, two, or three? With the open and close buttons, that makes five buttons overall."

"I think it's some combination of those buttons," I said.

If there were more combinations, it would've been extremely difficult to test them all. Ibuki started trying out the limited number of combinations. As I watched, I mentally crossed off the ones that didn't work.

“Ah, I can’t take it! It’s so hot!” Ibuki whined.

She punched the wall to relieve some frustration. Considering how on-edge she was, I decided to drop it.

“It’s not opening. Have we already tested everything?” she asked.

“Almost. If there are any button combinations left…”

There was one possibility. I decided to try out one last command.

“Why don’t you try pushing the button for your desired floor, plus the close-door button at the same time?” I suggested.

“The close-door button? All right.” Ibuki muttered dismissively, but she tested the combination.

I didn’t expect the elevator to respond, but it started to move. Ibuki and I looked at each other. After a few seconds, the elevator arrived on the first floor, and the doors slowly opened. Cool air flowed inside the car. We found two adults looking at us, wearing shocked expressions.

“Are you all right?! Are you hurt?!”

“We’re okay, we’re not hurt. It was just really hot,” I answered.

Looking at our sweaty state, they could probably guess how hot it was. They offered us sports drinks right away, and instructed us to head over to the doctor’s office for examination, just in case.

“Um, can I ask one question? Could it be that we moved the elevator?”

“Oh, no, we moved it directly from here.”

A special remote control operated the elevator from the first floor. Apparently, Ibuki and I hadn’t caused the elevator to move using express mode, or anything. We just happened to push the buttons at the exact same time the adults operated the elevator remotely.

“You must have had a rough time in there.”

“Yeah, it was a disaster. Fortune-telling is serious business,” Ibuki said.

As I thanked the adults, a man watching from the sidelines approached us.

“Are you all right, Ayanokouji?” the large man asked. He seemed more anxious than someone that size should.

“You rescued us,” I told him.

This man, Katsuragi, was probably the one who’d saved the day.

“I got the gist of the situation from the information you gave me over the phone. I’m sure you must be glad to be down,” he replied.

“I have to head to the doctor’s office now, but I’ll thank you properly later,” I said.

“There’s no need. You and Sudou have helped me a lot. There are some lines we can’t cross, because we’re from different classes, but I happen to think cooperation’s an excellent thing,” answered Katsuragi.

“Sounds like things went well for you,” I said.

“Yeah. Sudou performed brilliantly. Please tell him once again that I’m very appreciative.”

“Sure thing.”

“I should thank you as well, Ayanokouji. Despite the plentiful evidence, there must have been considerable resistance to the plan I proposed.”

Katsuragi bowed his head in gratitude. I owed him, too. Had I been stuck in that elevator any longer, I might have lost it.

“If you need anything else, please contact me. I’ll assist you with anything…other than exams, of course.” Katsuragi chuckled.

With that, he turned and left.

Katsuragi and I had started to become real friends. We were as close as I was to the three idiots, maybe even more so. But how did I know Katsuragi’s contact information, even though he was in Class A? And why were we close?

The story of our friendship had begun a little while ago.

Chapter 3:
Katsuragi Kouhei is
Surprisingly Troubled

Although most Japanese people aren't typically mindful of religion, Christianity has influenced them strongly through events such as Christmas and birthday celebrations. You could say that was a result of people's faith, but also that it came from clever marketing luring them in. The recent trend of celebrating Halloween could be chalked up to the same influence.

What I'm trying to say is that birthdays were rather significant events at this school. The convenience stores, shopping malls, and other campus facilities had special kiosks set up for that single purpose.

This particular story began one week before Ibuki and I ended up stuck in an elevator, when I received a message from Kushida, the class sweetheart.

The message read, *Next Wednesday is Inogashira-san's birthday. Would you care to celebrate with us?*

She had sent the message to our group chat. Inogashira was a somewhat quiet, plain girl from Class D, rather like Sakura. She didn't have many friends, so the idea seemed to be to help her make some. Of course, Ike jumped at the invitation, for a blatantly obvious reason: he liked Kushida and wanted to be in her good graces. He'd probably use this event as a way to get closer to her.

He messaged us. *You got a message from Kikyou-chan too, right? Let's get some presents for Kokoro-chan!*

Yamauchi's response was slow in coming. *Well, I don't got any money. I should be getting some next month, though .*

That was right—the Class D students were basically broke. We'd netted good results in the last special exam, and certain students had been promised rather large amounts of private points. Sadly, those points wouldn't be deposited until September 1. By that time, the elevator incident had happened, so I'd used up a lot

of points on the fortune-teller and had almost nothing left.

I would be finishing summer vacation as a poor man. Did these guys plan on buying individual gifts? If this were a close friend's birthday, that'd be one thing. But none of my friends were close with Inogashira.

Isn't it all right if the guys just pool their points and buy her one present? In that case, we should be able to buy her a proper gift , even if it's just 500 points, I proposed.

I thought Yamauchi would agree to that, but apparently his financial situation was dire. He was just barely scraping by, living a life of poverty.

We had been awarded 8,700 private points at the start of August. Compared to an average high schooler's allowance, that was a little unsatisfactory, but you could get by on it by if you were smart. Fortunately, the school provided a free meal plan, and water was free. So, if you were frugal, it was possible to get by without spending a single yen. Still, most students ran out of money once the end of the month approached, just like when we'd started school there and received 100,000 points in that first month. If people had money, they liked to spend it.

In the end, all three of them agreed with my proposition. We decided to go out and buy the present together.

3.1

As I felt the boiling heat on my skin, I wiped sweat off my forehead.

"But…why is Kikyou-chan not here?! Huh, Ayanokouji?! She's the most important person!" shouted Ike.

The first thing out of Ike's mouth when we met was his concern regarding Kushida's absence. I wished he wouldn't turn to me for an explanation. I wasn't in charge of Horikita and Kushida's schedules.

"Try to calm down. Remember, Kushida never said that she'd go with us." Kushida had seemingly invited her other girlfriends shopping, rather than spend time with a bunch of overheated boys.

"I'm not convinced! If Kikyou-chan isn't here, there's no point!" Ike shouted.

"Now I have to shop for a present I don't even care about with a bunch of assholes!" Yamauchi complained.

I understood why he wanted to shout, but it wasn't like *I* wanted to hang out with a bunch of dumb guys, either. Well, I supposed I was enjoying this a little. It was the first time I'd hung out with other guys during summer vacation, besides the special tests. Normal people generally do things like shop or go the movies with their friends.

"It's pretty lame to go shopping for a birthday present when it's just us three assholes, huh? Haruki, I'll leave the rest to you. Go ahead and pick something Kokoro-chan would like," said Ike.

"Screw that. You wanted to go, so you should do the shopping!" countered Yamauchi.

The two of them bickered until I stepped in.

"How about you two calm down? It'll be better if we shop together, right? Sudou's also entrusted us with his share of the points," I said.

"That's true, but I don't think it's necessary for the three of us

to go," Ike whined.

"We've come all this way. Let's hurry up, buy the present, and head back," I replied. "We're wasting time and energy just standing here and complaining in this heat, don't you agree?"

"Enough, I get it already. Let's just buy it and head back. Ah, this is so boring!"

In contrast to the other two guys, I was a little excited as we headed to the store. Passing all the shops lined up on campus, we came to a store that girls frequented. The clerk was an older beauty, and the interior was completely pink. Frivolous objects like stuffed animals and cell phone accessories lined the shelves. It felt as though the shop was trying to squeeze private points out of the students.

"Well, since the school gave us points in the first place, it's not really a loss," I murmured.

"What are you muttering about? Come on, help us pick what we should buy," said Ike. The two of them should have been ashamed of themselves. They were ogling the beautiful store clerk and the other girls as they shopped, clearly having a good time.

We split up and hunted around the store to find a birthday present. Of course, I'd never intended to pick it myself. I had no idea what to choose.

"Something Kokoro-chan would like, huh? Honestly, I have no clue," I murmured.

This was my first time giving someone a birthday present, but I wasn't sure whether I could categorize this as an individual "first" for me, since the present was supposed to come from the three of us. At any rate, I had no experience with birthday-present shopping. The only ideas I came up with were things like a bouquet of roses, or a ring, which were hardly sensible. Those weren't even birthday gifts; they were what you'd bring to propose marriage. I wanted to find something safe.

After circling the shop, I met up with Yamauchi again. He held a small, white stuffed bear. I, meanwhile, had a cell phone case. When Yamauchi saw that, he grimaced.

"Just put that phone case away. Kokoro-chan definitely has

one already. Besides, it's so completely different from what she likes, I think it'd just cause trouble, honestly," he said.

"I see. Well, how about this screen protector?" I showed him what I'd picked out as a backup plan. Yamauchi frowned even more deeply.

"No, no, no. She doesn't need something like that. You really have no sense when it comes to this stuff, Ayanokouji."

"But wouldn't stuffed animals just clutter her room?" I asked. It wasn't like a stuffed animal would be useful.

"Sure, it might be in the way, but she can use it to decorate. It matches her interior. Kokoro-chan likes the white bear series, so she should be happy with this present. Besides, I don't want to hear any sass from the guy who picked out a screen protector," Yamauchi snapped.

When he made fun of me like that, it really came as a shock. Still, I was honestly impressed that he'd researched the tastes of the gift's recipient. I had enough trouble just trying to remember Inogashira's name and face.

"So, where's Kanji?"

"I wonder…"

We found Ike standing completely still over by the keychain section. He looked strangely serious, so we approached quietly. Ike was holding some kind of object with an orange character motif. He also held a cloth with the white bear character Yamauchi had mentioned on it.

"Hey, Kanji."

"Wha—?! D-don't surprise me like that! Jeez!" Flustered, Ike dropped the keychain. Then, for some reason, he immediately put it back on the shelf, as if trying to hide it.

"D-did you already decide?" Yamauchi asked.

"Yeah, I thought we'd buy this white bear towel. Ha ha ha," Ike replied.

"Not that. Why were you looking at keychains?"

"Huh? It's not like I have an ulterior motive or anything. Anyway, let's see what's over there." Ike tried to change the subject.

Yamauchi eyed him suspiciously.

"Wait. If I remember correctly, didn't Shinohara like that orange character?"

I certainly hadn't expected to hear Shinohara's name. She was a girl from Class D. During the test on the uninhabited island, she'd clashed with Ike numerous times.

"R-really? That so? No, I was just wondering what Kikyou-chan would think, is all," Ike bluffed. Despite his words, he was obviously shaken.

"Wait a minute. You're not thinking about Shinohara, are you?" Yamauchi inquired.

"Huh?! What?! No way in hell, dude! That ugly chick? No way!"

It was certainly true that you might say Shinohara was plain, compared to Kushida. But she was plenty cute in her own right. She had a somewhat forbidding personality, but even that could be thought of as appealing.

"Are you for real? Something seems super suspicious here, don't you think, Ayanokouji?"

"Well, that certainly didn't seem like a typical Ike reaction," I answered.

"Look, don't get the wrong idea!" Ike shouted. "Shinohara isn't cute at all, and she has too much attitude! If I went out with a girl like her, I'd be too embarrassed to show my face anywhere!"

"Ah."

Yamauchi and I had both noticed another presence in the store. We frantically tried to get Ike to change the subject.

"Sure, sure. We got it. We understand what you're saying. Let's go pick out Kokoro-chan's birthday present," urged Yamauchi.

"No, you *don't* get it. You want to know how ugly I think Shinohara is? Listen up. It's not just her face, her personality is ugly too, you know? Not to mention she's practically a stick—she has, like, no curves. Even among other ugly chicks, she's probably the ugliest!"

"A-all right, we get it already. Knock it off, Kanji! Look behind

you!”

“Huh?”

Ike slowly turned. Shinohara stood behind him, looking as though she was about to start breathing fire. Glancing around the store, I saw her friends, including Kushida, some distance away. I supposed that was only natural. They were probably at the shop to pick out a birthday present for Inogashira, like us.

“You can just go ahead and die, Ike!”

With those heated words, Shinohara stormed out of the store. Ike watched her leave, seemingly unable to respond. He just stood there, dumbfounded, looking at Shinohara as she left.

“Wh-what does she mean, ‘die’? That’s rich, coming from an uggo. R-right, guys?”

Despite his shock, Ike tried to pretend he was still composed. We couldn’t really do anything, so we just nodded.

“H-hey, check it out, Ayanokouji! The baldy is here!” Yamauchi grabbed my shoulder.

He clearly wanted to change the subject. I immediately knew who he meant. A giant man whose forbidding appearance contrasted starkly with this cute store looked at a shelf lined with goods. His back was turned to us.

It was Katsuragi from Class A. He meandered around, wearing an intensely stern expression.

“You think he’s gonna shoplift?”

I really doubted that. Still, I hid without thinking, and watched him with Ike and Yamauchi. Katsuragi’s expression remained unchanged, but he glanced around as if worried about something. He certainly looked like someone thinking about stealing.

I unconsciously grabbed my phone. If I caught Katsuragi in the act, that could be useful later… No. I rejected that idea.

“Why would I think something like that?” I asked myself.

“Huh? What’d you say, Ayanokouji?”

“Nothing.” If Katsuragi tried to shoplift, that had nothing to do with me.

“H-hey. What’s baldy got there?!”

Yamauchi and Ike were anxious to witness a crime, almost as if they were anti-shoplifting undercover cops. However, Katsuragi returned the thin box to the shelf. He took down a similar item, then went through the same motions again. It looked less like he wanted to steal anything, and more like he was just confused about what to buy. Ike noticed the discrepancy as well, and looked puzzled.

“Maybe he doesn’t want anyone to see what he’s buying?” Ike suggested.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

So, Katsuragi came here to buy a present for someone. He seemed to be nearing a decision. Eventually, he picked a box off the shelf and made his way to the counter.

GIFT

Ike and Yamauchi rushed over to where Katsuragi had selected his present. The boxes looked like thin boards. They grabbed one, turned it over, and glanced at the product information.

"This is…chocolate."

Ike and Yamauchi trembled, as if something had fired them up.

"W-wait, don't tell me that baldy already has a girlfriend?!"

"Seriously?! So, *that's* the power of Class A?!"

Ike and Yamauchi were evidently trembling with jealous rage over something so trivial.

"It might just be a present for a friend, right?"

"Who gives a present with such cute wrapping paper to a friend?! Would *you* ?! No, you wouldn't!"

"I guess not."

It was certainly difficult to imagine giving such a cute little box, adorned with ribbons, to a friend. At the very least, I couldn't imagine that you'd give it to someone of the same sex. It had to be for a girl Katsuragi was intimate with. That *did* suggest that he probably had a partner.

Ike and Yamauchi glanced at Katsuragi again as they hid behind the shelves, collecting information.

"Is this a birthday present for someone?" the clerk asked Katsuragi.

"Yes."

"Would you like to include a birthday card?"

"Yes, please. The birthday is August 29."

Katsuragi answered the clerk's questions. Who in the world was the present for? Ike and Yamauchi started whispering.

"Did you hear that? Which girl has a birthday on the twenty-ninth?"

"I-I have no idea. I mean, today's Sunday, the twenty-first, so…her birthday would be Monday next week, right? Do *you* know

who it might be, Ayanokouji?”

“No clue.”

If those two didn’t know, there was no way I did.

3.2

"Hey. I guess I've already brought this up, but why exactly are we in my room?" I asked.

For some reason, part of our usual group had gathered in my room after dinner that night. Ike and Yamauchi were there, as they'd promised. Kushida also came, as did Sudou, after he finished his club activities. If Horikita had been here, too, it would've been perfect.

"Kikyou-chan, do you know the other girls' birthdays?" asked Ike.

"Yeah. I think I've memorized the birthdates of everyone who's told me, more or less. Whose birthday did you want to know?" she answered.

"Well, the thing is, it might not be someone from Class D," Ike added.

"If it's an upperclassman, I don't know most of them, to be honest. But if it's a first year, I'd probably know them," said Kushida, just as I'd expected.

"Which girls have birthdays on the twenty-ninth of this month?" asked Ike.

"A girl whose birthday is on the twenty-ninth? Hold on just a minute," said Kushida.

She pulled out her phone and went through what had to be a birthday list. After she scrolled for a little while, she looked back up at us.

"Sorry, but it doesn't seem like anyone I know has a birthday then."

"I think it's probably a girl from Class A."

"Class A? Hmm… I know all their birthdays, though."

However, Kushida didn't seem to know one girl's birthday, which was the day after tomorrow.

“If it’s a first-year girl, I should know everyone, but I can’t think of anyone who fits,” mused Kushida. If even her overwhelming social network couldn’t produce a name for us, it probably meant that the girl was from a different class.

“Does this mean it’s probably an upperclassman?” said Ike, throwing his arms up in defeat and collapsing onto his back.

“What’s the matter with the girl born on the twenty-ninth?” asked Kushida.

Ike responded matter-of-factly. “Just listen to this! You know that baldy in Class A, Katsuragi?”

“Yeah. Katsuragi-kun is famous. He’s the class leader. I was in the same group as him during the test on the ship,” answered Kushida.

“Well, that baldy is giving someone a birthday present on the twenty-ninth. Even though he’s bald!”

“Katsuragi-kun lost his hair completely when he was young, due to illness. You really shouldn’t make fun of him,” Kushida warned.

“Uh…”

Scolded, Ike fell silent. He should’ve been fully aware that mocking the ill was shameful. Doing so for a cheap laugh made him less likable.

“Okay, so, from now on, you’ll address him properly, won’t you?”

“O-of course. I’m sorry, Kikyou-chan.”

“It’s okay, as long as you understand now.” There was a brief pause. It seemed like Kushida had one more thing she wanted to talk about. “Also, about what happened today with Shinohara-san…”

“Uh…”

Ike had apparently forgotten about the incident, but Kushida hadn’t.

“You understand what you should do about it, right?” She didn’t touch on the subject directly, but simply asked that question in a gentle manner.

“I’ll apologize,” Ike answered sullenly. He looked dissatisfied, but he sounded genuine. He glared at Yamauchi, who was chuckling.

“Good. If you do that, I think Shinohara-san will forgive you.”

Ike might actually have matured a little bit, thanks to Kushida.

“So, you were talking about Katsuragi-kun giving someone a birthday present?” asked Kushida.

“Oh, yeah, yeah. I was wondering if you might know something about that, Kikyou-chan.”

Kushida seemed to be mentally scanning her social network, but couldn’t come up with anything. “Hmm. I never got the impression that Katsuragi-kun was the romantic sort,” she mused. “At least, not before.”

“Could the gift be for an upperclassman?”

“I suppose so. There’s still a lot I don’t know, after all.”

It would be pretty impressive if Katsuragi had started going out with an upperclassman just a short while after beginning school. I genuinely admired the leader of Class A.

“Since it’s come to this, let’s locate Katsuragi’s girlfriend at any cost!” Ike urged.

I felt badly for interrupting when they were in such high spirits, but felt I ought to point out another possibility. “Should we really conclude that Katsuragi was shopping for a senior girl?” I asked.

“Kikyou-chan said she doesn’t know any girl with a birthday on the twenty-ninth, so there aren’t other options, are there? Or am I missing something? It couldn’t possibly be Horikita-san, could it?”

It was a completely baseless assumption, but I couldn’t exclude that possibility.

“Well, I guess that’s possible.”

“Huh? Come on, you’re messing with me, right?” Sudou, who’d been listening quietly to our conversation, suddenly grabbed Ike by the collar and glared at me.

“Guh! C-come on. I just said ‘possibly’!” Ike shouted, panicking.

“Hey, Ayanokouji. When is Suzune’s birthday?” Sudou growled.

“Dunno,” I replied.

“The hell, dude? You’re worthless,” he barked.

I still didn’t know when Horikita’s birthday was.

“I don’t really think anyone at our school knows her birthday,” I replied. The only person who might know was her older brother Horikita Manabu, the student council president.

“I see. Yeah, I guess you got a point. Just because I don’t know, and Ayanokouji doesn’t know, don’t mean that *he* knows, I guess.” Sudou shrugged.

“I know Horikita-san’s birthday. It’s on February 15. I don’t think that has anything to do with this,” Kushida announced.

“Just as we’d expect of you, Kushida,” I said.

I’d praised her without thinking. I hadn’t expected even Kushida to obtain information about stubborn loners like Horikita and Ibuki, especially Horikita. I was one of the few who knew that Kushida hated Horikita, and Horikita hated Kushida.

I hadn’t thought they were on such good terms that they’d tell each other their birthdays.

“February 15, huh? Sounds like I’ve snagged some good info,” Sudou chuckled. He wore a wide grin. Ike, still in a headlock, tried to tap out as his face turned blue. “Oh, sorry. My bad. Kinda forgot about you.”

“Ken, you really gotta be more careful. You’re stupidly strong!” Ike groaned, wheezing.

“You asked for it,” Sudou answered.

“Then you should’ve done that to Ayanokouji, too! Why’d you only hurt me?!”

“‘Cause you were closest.”

“You single-celled organism!”

“Huh?”

Sudou moved to grab Ike by the collar again, and Ike panicked and put distance between them. I wished they wouldn’t cause a

ruckus in someone else's room. Or at least, not in my room.

"Well, the conversation kind of got off track, but I have a different idea. There are other potential candidates for Katsuragi's present as well. It could be for a teacher, or one of the Keyaki Mall workers. I mean, the people we saw while we were shopping today were all beautiful, right?" I said.

"I-I see. When you put it like that, you have a point."

Who knew whether an adult would even consider dating a first-year high school student? From a legal and moral perspective, there was almost no way they could become a couple. I was sure that Katsuragi understood that, too. However, we couldn't exclude the possibility.

I wanted Ike and Sudou to understand that it was probably best just to leave things alone.

"How about we quit while we're ahead, and not get too carried away looking for whoever Katsuragi's partner might be, okay?"

"Are you seriously okay with that?! Even if that baldy has a girlfriend with huge boobs, who's also really into him, even though she's older?!"

"I mean, he's in Class A. It wouldn't be strange if he's popular with older girls."

We, on the other hand, were from Class D. Just being slightly attractive or having a good personality weren't enough to make us popular. That said, Hirata was popular with both our class and upperclassmen. Kouenji seemed to have a degree of widespread popularity, too.

In the end, the one thing I had in common with Ike and the other guys was that we weren't exactly popular.

"I absolutely hate the idea of Katsuragi beating me!" Ike whined.

"Look, there's nothing we can do, right?"

"That ain't true! Just because we'll probably lose to him doesn't mean we don't have a chance of winning!" Sudou shouted.

He peered at us, slapping his shorts-clad thighs.

“In basketball, you can use plays that are just barely allowed. You can even commit a foul, if it’s absolutely necessary to win. A strong desire for victory is what really matters. If Katsuragi giving a present to some girl will bring them closer, then we gotta stop him from doing it,” Sudou continued.

That wasn’t rationality talking, but personal jealousy. It wasn’t good, although Sudou seemed fiercely motivated.

“That reminds me, your tournament’s coming up soon,” Yamauchi told Sudou.

“Yeah. It’s on Thursday. I don’t know if I’ll get put in the game, but I’ll be ready, for sure,” Sudou replied. *Smack* ! He slammed his right fist into his open left hand.

“All right, that’s it! I’m gonna get in his way!” Ike jumped on board with Sudou’s plan to interfere with Katsuragi.

“Kushida, please say something to him,” I said.

“Kanji-kun, you can’t interfere,” she said.

“Huh? But… Kikyou-chan, you’re interested in knowing who Katsuragi’s girlfriend is, too, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m curious, but getting in the way is not okay.”

Just like that, Kushida extinguished Ike’s excitement like she was dousing a fire. Ike looked disappointed. He turned toward me, perhaps dissatisfied that Kushida had rejected his scheme to interfere, or remembering what had happened with Shinohara before.

“Okay. You, then, Ayanokouji. You find out the mystery person’s identity. Find out who Katsuragi is giving the gift to.”

“Impossible.”

“You gotta do it. I mean, you got free time, right?”

I couldn’t deny that, but I preferred that Ike just investigate the matter himself.

“Okay, sure, you want me to find this person. But I’m not even in the same class as Katsuragi, and we’re not friends, either,” I answered.

Trying to investigate someone whose name I didn’t even know, let alone gain their contact information and room number,

was going to be a Herculean task.

"I have Katsuragi-kun's contact information. Do you want me to give it to you?" Kushida asked.

"……"

It wasn't strange that she'd know Katsuragi's contact information. Kushida was a beautiful girl with a huge social network. She even knew when Horikita's birthday was, after all.

"How do you know Katsuragi's number?" I asked her.

"We were placed in the same group during the last special exam, remember? I asked him for it." To casually exchange contact information like that was honestly amazing. "So, you want me to tell you?"

"No, that's okay. If I suddenly contacted him, I think even Katsuragi would be surprised," I reasoned. He might just ignore an incoming call from a number he didn't recognize.

"You stopped me from interfering in Katsuragi's plans, so you gotta take responsibility," Ike told me.

"Okay, but even if you tell me to take responsibility…"

"I'm curious, too. You gotta investigate," added Sudou, giving me a rather high-handed order.

"Don't you think you should do it yourselves?" I asked.

"Huh? I have a big tournament on Thursday. I don't got any free time until after. I only got a few more days left to practice, you know?"

When I remained silent, Sudou glared.

"Should I force you?" he asked. He swung his arms around, starting to wind up.

It looked as though he intended to put me into a headlock. There'd be no escape if he decided to make an example of me.

"Okay, I understand. I'll do some digging tomorrow. Just don't expect too much. I have no idea how this is going to go," I told them.

For the time being, I supposed it was better to just grin and bear their request. If I reported back to Ike and Sudou later, and

said I couldn’t find anything, that would be the end of it.

3.3

"It's so hot. It's so hot, I feel like I could die…"

The next day, I parked myself at the crossroads connecting the paths to the various dorms, choosing a spot under the trees that lined the road. The crossroads were unavoidable if you wanted to meet up with a senior student. They also intersected with the path to the Keyaki Mall and the school building. No matter where Katsuragi decided to go, I wouldn't miss him.

It would've been better to wait in the cool lobby, but unfortunately, some girls from another class had decided to get together and have tea there. Discovering that had felt like entering a restaurant and finding no spots readily available. I wasn't confident enough to try to slip into the lobby, then sit down and relax when a seat opened up.

Of course, all the students were dressed casually. That made me think of Katsuragi yesterday, still wearing his uniform. No rule stated that you couldn't wear your uniform over summer vacation, but even if you didn't care much about fashion, the uniforms did get extremely hot. Katsuragi had even worn the long-sleeved uniform shirt, rather than the short-sleeved summer one.

Since I was typically low on points, I'd been unaware until recently that summer clothes were sold at rather high prices. There were girls in our class who wanted them, but had to do without. There were definitely reasons why someone would purposely wear their school uniform.

A couple walked out of the upperclassmen's dorms—a guy and a girl. When they saw me, they changed directions and walked toward me.

"Hey. It's been a while."

"I was just wondering who would wear their school uniform in this insane heat. I guess the answer is Horikita's brother," I muttered.

Unlike Katsuragi, these two wore summer uniforms. Still, I

couldn't help feeling like something was out of place.

"Whoa. President, this student really has a sour look on his face," said the girl next to Student Council President Horikita Manabu. She spoke in a loud, exaggerated manner. She was a third-year student, Secretary Tachibana.

The girls' uniforms looked as though they didn't get as intensely hot as the boys'.

"The student council seems rather busy, even during summer vacation," I said.

"We decided to do some reorganizing work in the student council room," explained Secretary Tachibana.

"I see."

"You know, that was a really stupid response. You should be careful what you say, you know? Do you even know who you're talking to? This is the fearsome student council president!" Tachibana was incensed.

Yeah, I knew that. I also knew Horikita Manabu probably wielded an incredible degree of influence. I'd considered using a more respectful tone, but discarded the idea. Horikita's older brother didn't seem to expect it of me, anyway.

"Do you want to penalize me? Because I'm really running low on points." I shrugged off what Secretary Tachibana said.

I'd thought that Horikita's older brother wouldn't give someone like me the time of day. But the student council president narrowed his eyes and said, "Ayanokouji, if you have no prior engagements, I'd like you to accompany me."

"P-President?" Secretary Tachibana was caught off guard by the invitation. So was I. But…

"I've got a packed schedule. Sorry."

"Huh?! *You're* turning *him* down?!" Secretary Tachibana sounded completely flabbergasted.

"Whenever you're free is fine. I don't mind finding a time that works for you, even if it's after the semester begins," Horikita said.

Apparently, he had no intention of giving up. Avoiding the problem would not help. I didn't want to waste my time later on. It

might be more convenient to get his request out of the way.

"All right. Let's just do this now. I have time before my next engagement, anyway," I replied.

"But didn't you just say you had a packed schedule?"

I ignored Secretary Tachibana.

"Where were you planning to go? I don't mind changing my schedule to accommodate yours," Horikita said.

"Uh, I was waiting for someone. If at all possible, I'd prefer not to move."

"But isn't it really hot here? This spot isn't suitable for a meeting."

"I'm well aware of that."

"Well, I suppose we can just talk here. If you feel uncomfortable, you can head back to the dorms ahead of me," the president told Tachibana.

"No. My instinct says not to leave you alone with this boy, President!" Secretary Tachibana gave him a salute, as if she were his bodyguard.

Horikita turned back to me. "The student council has received reports of the results from the island test, and the test on the ship. Were they difficult?" he asked.

"The student council really has a lot of pull, huh? I mean, to think you'd be able to get those results," I replied.

"Well, I don't know how detailed the reports really are. The individual actions taken during the tests remain unclear."

"I'm glad."

"You're glad that the president hasn't discovered your failure, I bet," Tachibana muttered.

Secretary Tachibana really didn't seem to like me. Perhaps that was understandable, given how casually I talked back to the student council president.

"One way or another, some information always ends up leaked. I know that you outsmarted the other classes on the island, and that Class D's VIP in the Rabbit group successfully avoided

detection," said President Horikita.

He'd said that things were unclear, but it sounded as though he knew quite a bit. I suspected collusion.

Horikita continued, "The name Horikita Suzune came up after the island test. I heard that she became her class's true leader and outsmarted everyone. However, I think that you were responsible."

"Aren't you overestimating me?" I muttered.

"In the end, the leader's name was changed to yours. How do you explain that?"

"You even know about all that, huh?"

"The special examination committee and I are the only ones who know this. Well, and now Secretary Tachibana. The homeroom teachers don't have this information, so you can relax."

Just how much pull did this guy have? Student organizations were usually decorative. They had no real authority. For them to have access to information the teachers didn't? Unthinkable.

"What exactly *is* the student council?" I asked.

"The student council itself has no power. The abilities of the person seated at the top are paramount."

"Wow, that's an impressive statement. You really are in Class A, aren't you?"

"Isn't that obvious?!" snapped Tachibana.

"But there's something I still don't understand. I mean, the difference between Horikita and me is vast. If you examine the data, Horikita is far superior. Why would you bother with some Class D loser like me?"

"You misunderstand. I don't consider the people in Class D stupid. This school doesn't just shove all the students with superior abilities into Class A," he replied.

"Um, President? You might have said too much," Tachibana said. "Aren't you going a little too far?"

"There's no problem. I'm sure this young man understands that already."

The student council president had seemed hyper-focused on

me ever since our first encounter. Just how long did he plan to keep this up?

"In that case, why do you reject Horikita? Isn't it because she's in Class D?" I asked.

"I know everything there is to know about my little sister's capabilities. She's a failure who belongs in Class D. Nothing more, nothing less," he replied.

He clearly viewed his younger sister in an incredibly harsh light.

"Everything was Horikita's idea. Your sister doesn't have any friends except for me, so she had to employ me to play the necessary parts," I answered.

"That's not true. She'd never think of something like that."

It seemed as though he had a perfect understanding of Horikita, perhaps because they grew up together. Even so, I now understood something. This guy probably had his eye on me for the same reason as Chabashira-sensei.

If the president had noticed that I scored exactly 50% on all my entrance examinations, he might also have noticed the difference between my resume and my student report.

"Stop fishing for information about my personal life. I just want to spend my days here quietly," I said.

In response, the student council president pushed up his glasses and said something completely astounding.

"I asked you once before. Will you join the student council?"

Secretary Tachibana's eyes widened in shock.

"Wow, that sounds super easy. What, there are still positions that haven't been filled or something?" I asked.

"P-President?" Secretary Tachibana stammered. "Didn't we just accept a first-year girl onto the student council the other day? We've also gotten new appointments from the second-year classes. All the seats should be filled."

"There's still one open position, isn't there?" he asked.

"One? Y-you can't mean—?!"

“Ayanokouji, if you wish, I’ll appoint you vice president,” the president said.

“W-wait a minute!” Secretary Tachibana seemed to recover her resolve in an instant. An interesting person. “This is completely unprecedented! He’s a first year, and from Class D to boot! We can’t suddenly appoint this rude boy to the vice presidency!”

“I’ve said this already, but I refuse any position,” I said.

“And on top of that, he just refuses!” Tachibana wailed.

This was all rather odd. I couldn’t imagine that the president was joking; his evaluation of me seemed honest. Horikita’s older brother certainly did have access to information, and I could understand why he’d choose me, rather than people like Ike and Yamauchi (no offense to those guys). But he should’ve started with people like Katsuragi and Ichinose, or even Hirata. There were also other candidates with strong latent abilities, like Kouenji.

The president had no motive to fixate on me. There had to be a reason why.

“I don’t know that this is for me to say, but starting next year, the school will change dramatically. Not for the better. When the time comes, I’ll need the power to combat that change. It might already be too late. The need grows stronger every day.”

“President, you’re talking about what’ll happen when Nagumo-kun is elected president, right? I can’t imagine he’d change the school that much for the worse,” Tachibana said.

I’d never heard the name “Nagumo” from any first-year students. If the president said that the change was coming next year, that probably meant Nagumo was a second-year student.

“There can be two student council vice presidents. There is typically only one in any given year, but if you wanted the position, it wouldn’t be impossible,” he told me.

“N-no, no no no, President! That’s impossible…! There’s no way Nagumo-kun would permit something like that,” Secretary Tachibana interjected.

“Look, I don’t know about vice presidents, or this Nagumo guy, or whatever. I’m not doing it. Besides, you’re going to graduate, right? There’s no need for you to worry about the

students left behind. Or is there?" I paused for a moment, using that brief silence to stress the importance of what came next. "Well, if you want me to help you because you're worried about your sister, I might be able to squeeze you in for a consultation."

"I see."

Horikita Manabu seemed to have given up on me.

"Sorry for taking up your time. Please feel free to stop by the student council whenever you like. I would be happy to offer you tea," he said.

Even someone like the student council president was wrestling with his own anxieties, I mused. I wanted to go back to the dorms, but I couldn't. I had to wait for Katsuragi.

3.4

Thirty minutes after I'd spoken with Horikita's older brother, I watched Katsuragi approach. He wore the same thing he'd had on yesterday and held some kind of shopping bag. Perhaps it contained his purchase.

What's this all about? I wondered.

There was still some time left before the twenty-ninth. But if Katsuragi was carrying the gift with him now, that probably meant he planned on handing it over immediately. Right?

At any rate, I still wanted to know why he was wearing his uniform. Maybe he planned to meet with this person in formal wear, but I honestly couldn't imagine doing something so important while wearing a uniform in the heat. I held my breath as I watched Katsuragi arrive at the crossroads.

He didn't take the path toward the upperclassmen's dorms. Unbelievably, he headed in a direction I hadn't expected: towards the school. I followed, taking care that he didn't notice me.

"That's why he's wearing his uniform, huh?"

I finally understood. He wasn't doing so because he liked the uniform—it was to enter the school building. Katsuragi walked straight through the main entrance, and I couldn't just follow. Entering the school building while wearing casual clothes was forbidden.

Did you meet Katsuragi?!

My cell phone vibrated with a rather thoughtless chat message, undoubtedly sent by someone back in their room. I deliberately put my phone away, then changed my plan of attack.

I headed toward the shop where Katsuragi had picked out the present yesterday at the Keyaki Mall. I stood before the stacks of chocolate boxes and tried to picture him buying the gift for a man, but it didn't seem very likely. The boxes had flourishes such as hearts and other designs that would appeal primarily to girls.

“Ha ha ha! I know, right?”

Some boisterous female students passed behind me. I felt a light thump on my back.

“Oof.”

Reflexively, my elbow brushed the stacks of boxes. The chocolates came tumbling down in an avalanche. The girls, completely absorbed in their conversation, did not notice the tragedy that had just unfolded. They kept on walking.

“Jeez,” I muttered.

“What are you doing?”

“Geh!”

As I frantically tried to re-shelve the boxes, a giant man called out to me. It was Katsuragi. He looked extremely perplexed.

“I came here to buy…a birthday present,” I stammered.

That was the only answer I could come up with. Katsuragi looked down at the scattered boxes, then bent and started picking them up.

“Ah, it’s okay. I can do that,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. I think this mess might make other customers uncomfortable. It’s best we clean up quickly. Two are better than one.”

There wasn’t any hint of dislike in his voice. I’d probably only spent around thirty minutes in the mall. I wondered if Katsuragi had finished his business at school so quickly. However, he still held his gift bag. I stealthily peeked inside and saw a thin, gift-wrapped box. The present. He hadn’t given it away yet.

We finished cleaning up before we knew it. Fortunately, neither the clerks nor the other customers had noticed us tidying.

“Thanks a lot.”

Katsuragi was a good guy. Even on the uninhabited island, he’d shown a strange goodwill toward us when we discovered the corn. I didn’t expect him to be merciful if push came to shove, but he didn’t appear to be a bad person.

“Are you giving your girlfriend a present?” he asked me.

“Huh? Uh, no, I don’t have a girlfriend. The present is just for a classmate. I think I’ll buy something next time, though,” I answered.

I moved farther from the shelves. Katsuragi, as if in sync with me, also moved backward. I decided I’d try to extract more information.

“Are you buying a birthday present?” I asked.

“Hmm? Why would you think that?”

“You’re holding a bag from this store,” I said.

“I see. Well, yes, you’re certainly right. I suppose I didn’t think about it,” Katsuragi mused.

His eyes met mine.

“I couldn’t find what I wanted. The selection’s not great. What did you buy?” I asked.

“Nothing major. One of the boxes of chocolates. I don’t think the selection in this store is bad at all, but I suppose it comes down to individual preference. I ought to look around elsewhere,” he replied.

Katsuragi walked toward the door, and I followed him. We left the store together before I could ask who the gift was for.

“Why are you wearing your uniform?” I inquired. I wouldn’t have broached the topic yesterday, but he’d been wearing it for two days straight.

“You’re required to wear your uniform if you enter the school,” he replied.

“So, you went to the school?” Of course, I knew that already.

“Uh, well, I’ve various private matters to attend to,” he replied.

Although Katsuragi was being vague, he seemed to have something on his mind. He glanced in the direction of the school briefly.

“Hey, have you ever thought about the disadvantages of attending this school?” he asked.

“Disadvantages?”

“Yeah. I don’t mean being divided into classes. I mean something that affects all students equally.”

I considered his mysterious question. The class system had its downsides, of course, but the problems it created mostly affected the lower classes—like Class D’s current points shortage. It was hard to imagine Class A in a similar situation.

Since Katsuragi said the disadvantage applied to all students equally, that probably wasn’t it. But then, what in the world was he talking about? Nothing came to mind.

“You know. The stipulation that you can’t contact anyone on the outside,” he explained.

“Ah, I see.” I personally considered that an advantage, but it was probably bad from a normal person’s perspective.

“Don’t you want to contact your parents or siblings?”

“Eh. Well, I *do* get the feeling that lots of students would agree with you,” I replied.

Quite a few girls, in particular, said they felt lonely. The school was strict about controlling the flow of information, so it forbade communication with the outside world. Breaking that rule could mean expulsion.

“But the benefits you get from the school are tremendous. That one disadvantage isn’t enough to make you feel dissatisfied, right?” I asked.

“True. Both the points system, and the quality of the facilities here, are things that ordinary students can only dream of,” he replied.

On top of that, Katsuragi would also graduate from Class A. Wait, why was I talking so casually with Katsuragi? And during summer vacation, no less.

“You’re close with Horikita, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Is that misconception making the rounds or something?” I asked.

“Misconception? I saw you working together earlier.”

“Well, it’s just one of those things. It’s not exactly what either of us wanted, but we were kind of forced into a partnership, I think.

We really only talk because we're seated next to each other," I explained.

Katsuragi seemed to understand. He nodded. "Ah, so that's how it is. Well, despite seeming like I know a lot about other classes, there's quite a bit I don't know. If I offended you, please forgive me. I had no ill intent," he replied.

"Nah, I get that a lot. Don't worry about it. Horikita's pretty active, and she does a lot," I answered.

"It does appear that way." Katsuragi didn't seem as though he was going to elaborate any further. Instead, he changed the subject. "To tell you the truth, this is the third time I've visited this store. I'm the kind of person who tends to agonize over things. Even if it's just a single present, I can't make a snap decision when someone's feelings are involved."

Someone he agonized over giving a present to? Who in the world could that be? I decided to try digging a little deeper.

"You're a really sincere person. I mean, to go out and buy someone a birthday present," I replied.

"Is it strange to celebrate someone's birthday?"

Looking at the giant chrome dome in front of me, I did feel like his forbidding appearance contradicted his kind actions. But that was entirely my own bias. I mean, the world even contained delinquents who'd save a cat left out in the pouring rain.

"Okay, I'll just ask straight out. Who's the gift for?" I asked. Questioning Katsuragi in a roundabout way would get us nowhere.

"Who am I giving it to?" He seemed perplexed. "It's personal. It's not for you to hear."

He'd dodged the question. If we'd been best friends, I might have been able to push further, but as it was, I couldn't do much.

"Please excuse me," he added. With that, Katsuragi headed back toward the dormitory.

I'd managed to solve the mystery of why he was wearing his uniform, but more mysteries had sprung up in its wake. Why was Katsuragi going to the school building? Why had he returned to the store? I had no idea at all.

3.5

"Hey, Ike. I investigated the Katsuragi case."

"Whoa, seriously? Man, way to go, Ayanokouji! I'm seeing you in a new light!"

Ike slapped my shoulder as he complimented me. Had I really done something that warranted him reevaluating his opinion of me? Maybe he hadn't thought much of me to begin with.

"Unfortunately, I couldn't find out who the present was for," I explained.

To be more precise, I couldn't find a girl who fit the bill. As I said before, no one in our grade level had that birthdate. I couldn't think of any student from another year whose birthday was the twenty-ninth, either. Therefore, the person in question might not be a student at all.

Yamauchi looked up with wide eyes. "Oh man, no way.

I know what's going on. Whom Katsuragi wants to give that present to."

Rather than looking overjoyed, he had a sorrowful expression.

"Hey, Kanji. Didn't you think that Valentine's was hell, back in junior high?"

"Wh-what the hell are you asking me for? Well, sure. Yeah, it was tough. What about it?"

"I think this is basically an extension of that. I think he actually bought the gift for himself," said Yamauchi.

"No way, that—n-no, wait, I guess it *is* possible. I can't imagine that baldy is very popular…"

The pair of them seemed convinced. I hadn't considered that possibility, so doubts popped into my mind. "You're saying that he bought the present for himself? For his own birthday?"

"You think it's for something else then, Ayanokouji?" They glared at me.

People didn't normally buy themselves birthday presents, did they? Maybe if you thought of the present as a reward—like when you treated yourself to something delicious, or went out and bought something for yourself. This was different, however. Katsuragi specifically purchased chocolates with girlish packaging, and had them gift-wrapped.

If he had a sweet tooth, there were probably other ways he could treat himself.

"You seriously don't get it?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Okay. Katsuragi doesn't seem popular with the ladies, right? But right now, he *is* the leader of Class A."

I refrained from commenting on that.

"He's got a lot of pride. He'd definitely want people to think that he's popular. It's all an act."

"So, he's going to play this off like someone else bought the chocolates for him?"

Ike and Yamauchi must've felt pretty sure of this conclusion, because they both nodded in agreement.

"I did the same thing, back in junior high," Ike said. "Made it look like I got a present from the cutest girl in school."

"When you put it like that, it sounds hollow."

"Well, yeah, of course. But, that way, you're saved from the absolute despair of not getting any gifts!" Ike sounded angry. Apparently, he considered Valentine's Day and birthdays to be significant events.

"Besides, you're the same as me," he added. "Right, Haruki?"

"Huh? No, no way. I was popular with the ladies. Didn't you know?"

"Well then, why would you come to a conclusion like that? It's because you thought Katsuragi was doing the same things you did!"

"Nah, that's not true. In junior high, there was a really unpopular guy like you, Kanji. I knew about him. That's it."

Yamauchi was obviously bluffing, but I didn't have time to

prove it. “Aren’t you just speculating?”

“No! That’s definitely what’s going on!”

They seemed to like this theory, and they didn’t appear to have any intention of debating further.

“Hey, Haruki. Maybe we misunderstood the bald—I mean, Katsuragi. You think?”

“Yeah. We treated him like an enemy from Class A, but I suddenly feel closer to him.”

“So, you were an unpopular dude who bought himself presents, huh?”

“Wrong. He just reminded me of my classmate. I felt sorry for him.” Yamauchi stubbornly denied Ike’s jabs.

“Hey, do you want to help me out?” Ike asked me.

That was a sudden shift. “Help with what?” I asked.

“We’re going to get him a birthday present.” Ike’s newfound sympathy for Katsuragi appeared genuine. “It’s better when you get something from a girl, but that’s impossible in this case. I suppose getting a birthday present from anyone would be a blessing, wouldn’t it?”

That logic seemed strange, but I couldn’t completely deny it. People would rather receive a present from someone else than buy something for themselves. That said, they might not appreciate pity. If Katsuragi really had bought himself a gift, would it be a good idea for these two to “help” him out?

Ike and Yamauchi had already started discussing what to buy, but doubt still nagged at me. There weren’t any girls with a birthday tomorrow. However, we hadn’t eliminated all the other possibilities. There were still the teachers and other academic staff, as well as quite a few campus employees. If we broadened our idea of who the girl might be, plenty of candidates remained.

Besides, if Katsuragi *did* buy the present for himself, why had he purchased it so openly? He had been wearing his uniform in the middle of summer vacation. He had clearly stood out. It was easy to imagine people feeling suspicious if they saw him.

“Ayanokouji, you contribute some points, too. If we put about

1,500 points together, then we should be able to get something good."

I'd had this conversation yesterday, though. My expenses were going to double. A thousand points wasn't a small amount.

"Ayanokouji, this might be a little fast, but let's celebrate Katsuragi's birthday tomorrow."

Ike and Yamauchi acted almost as if a switch had been flipped. They went from hating Katsuragi to liking him in two seconds.

"Are you really buying something?"

"Of course. Don't you want to save a lonely, unpopular man?"

This was getting troublesome. I realized I'd better not refuse them. We decided to meet up the next day, and dispersed.

3.6

When we gathered the following afternoon, Kushida was there, too.

“Hello, Ayanokouji-kun,” she said.

“O-oh, hey,” I responded. Why was she there?

Ike answered my unasked question. “You see, I had a chat with Kikyou-chan yesterday. When I told her that we were going to buy a present for Katsuragi, she said she definitely wanted to help. She was like, ‘Please let me help,’ and all. Anyway, Katsuragi would probably be happier to have a girl celebrate with him, rather than a bunch of guys.”

Ike blabbered on and on about what a good person Kushida was, but he probably just wanted an opportunity to get together with her. Also, in her eyes, this would probably make him look like a good guy—the type who cares about his friends.

“Katsuragi-kun has done quite a bit for me, too. I’ll help out with the present’s cost, of course,” added Kushida.

Ike looked at her lovingly. Yamauchi also seemed happier with her around. Kushida’s charms affected him, too, even though he was aiming for Sakura.

“By the way, Ayanokouji-kun, why are you wearing your uniform?” asked Kushida.

“Meh. No reason.” I’d taken off my jacket because it was hot, but the uniform still made me stand out, unfortunately.

“Come on, let’s get going!”

Ike and Yamauchi walked on either side of Kushida, while I followed behind. Moments after we started walking, they managed to get a conversation blossoming.

As we walked, I saw someone I didn’t usually see outside.

“Hey, sorry. Could you guys go on ahead? I want to stop here for a sec,” I told them.

“Sure, but don’t keep Kikyou-chan waiting too long,” Ike replied.

“Okay.”

I left them and approached Horikita.

“Don’t you look carefree? Are the four of you just casually going shopping? Even after we suffered so much at Ryuuen-kun’s hands?” she said.

“Well, that just means that Class C did something right. There’s no use worrying about it now.”

“I suppose not. But I’m still uneasy about certain things.”

“Such as?”

“Never mind.”

She turned away with complete disinterest, like a haughty actress.

“When are we? Right now?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“I mean, at what point in the school year are we now? Do you know? The month?” I continued.

“What are you talking about?”

“Look, we just finished the first semester of our first year. We don’t need to ricochet between happiness and despair, with nothing in the middle, simply because they’ve got a small lead on us now.”

“But, even so, we suffered a severe loss. If we don’t think of a way—”

“Although you can’t see what’s directly beneath your feet, you’re always looking far ahead. If we’re talking academics, then you’re certainly peerless. But when it comes to unusual tests, well, you just kind of run in circles. That’s my impression, anyway.”

“I know that,” she replied.

“So, you’re aware? I think that it’s preferable for you to fall until you hit rock bottom,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

It was good to be thoroughly beaten down from time to time, as long as you eventually crawled back up. I thought Horikita had the potential to do that.

“There’s an order to things. It’s probably better for you not to panic, but to take things slowly. Right?”

“You say there’s an order to things, but if that’s true, why did you go to all that trouble back on the island? Isn’t that contradictory?”

“Yeah, probably.”

It made sense that Horikita found that confusing. She had no clue about my dealings with Chabashira-sensei. During the test on the island, I was forced to show off my abilities. I’d had no choice but to act.

Of course, I had no pawns at my disposal during the test on the cruise ship, which made it extremely challenging. Various other methods had been available to me, but I’d refrained from employing them. I was fundamentally disinterested in things like class rankings. By giving Chabashira-sensei only a partial display of my abilities, I’d bought some time without making too much of a splash. From that perspective, the tests had been hugely successful.

“More importantly, don’t you have any questions about the way I look?” I asked.

“Well, I think your clothes are ill-suited to this weather, but I don’t really care,” Horikita replied.

She wasn’t interested in others, as usual. “What are you reading today?” I asked.

“None of your business.” Apparently, she didn’t intend to show me the book’s title.

“Well, whatever. I’m keeping Ike and the others waiting. Do you want to come?”

“You’re kidding, right? I refuse.”

I’d known all along that that would be her answer.

3.7

"What are you all doing?"

Katsuragi, usually so calm, couldn't hide his surprise when Ike and the others surrounded him. Kushida quickly spoke up. After the last test, Katsuragi would be most familiar with her.

"Sorry for bothering you, Katsuragi-kun. Do you have a moment?" she asked.

"Kushida? What's going on?"

"To be honest, I heard about all this from Ike-kun and the others. Isn't it your birthday today, Katsuragi-kun?"

"Well, yes, but…I'm surprised you found out." Katsuragi wore a slightly puzzled expression, as if he couldn't remember telling anyone his birthday.

"The four of us wanted to celebrate with you, Katsuragi-kun," explained Kushida.

"Oh, that's all right. There's no need for you to do anything special."

Far from being welcoming, Katsuragi appeared guarded. That was to be expected. He probably thought this was a trap laid by Class D. The fact that he hadn't immediately shot us down was likely due to Kushida.

"Do you have plans today?" asked Kushida.

"Well, no. Not exactly."

Kushida clapped her hands and smiled, almost as if she were saying, "I'm happy to hear it!" If an ordinary guy saw that smile, he would've been smitten right then and there. Katsuragi, the leader of Class A, probably wasn't quite as easy a target.

"I'm terribly sorry to be rude, but we're not exactly close friends. If you have an ulterior motive, please tell me," he said.

"No, we don't have an ulterior motive. We really just wanted to celebrate your birthday, Katsuragi," said Ike, wearing a serious

look. He probably felt genuine sympathy.

"Hrm."

Katsuragi's mouth tightened, and it looked like he was about to turn us down. Then I realized that he still held the birthday present bag from yesterday. He'd purchased it two days ago; why was he was still walking around with it? Ike and the others didn't seem to share my suspicions (or pretended not to).

"I'm sorry, but I have some business in the school building. Excuse me," Katsuragi said.

"School? You know, that reminds me. You've been wearing your uniform a lot recently. What's going on?" asked Ike.

"What do you mean by that?" Katsuragi asked. His expression changed, as if he had switched into battle mode.

"Huh? What do you mean, what do I mean?" Ike looked startled.

"How did you know I've been wearing my uniform?" Katsuragi glared so intently, it was like he was devouring Ike.

"Huh? Well, no. That's not—" Ike gulped reflexively.

"After you and I talked yesterday, I met up with Ike and the others. I told them. Was that bad?" I asked. Given no other choice, I offered Katsuragi an explanation. "I thought it was rather unusual to wear that uniform during summer vacation."

"I see. Well, when you put it that way, I suppose you're right," Katsuragi answered.

"Yeah. That's what I was getting at, dude," added Ike.

"So, why are you going to school?" I asked. I'd successfully changed the topic, at least for the time being.

"It's personal. Nothing to do with you," he replied.

"Well, maybe I'm prying too much, but is something bothering you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were also carrying that bag around yesterday, weren't you? It's a bit unnatural to take that with you to school. You've been holding it since we met at the store yesterday. I think I

must've seen you with it at least three times so far. Right?" I asked.

"I have some business with the student council. That's all," he said.

Once again, a certain organization's name had come up.

"Were you wearing your uniform yesterday because you were going to the student council room?" I asked.

"That's right. However, they were out," answered Katsuragi.

"If I remember correctly, the student council room was being renovated until yesterday. It should've been unusable," I told him.

Katsuragi looked surprised. He asked how I knew.

"I happen to have a slight connection to the student council president," I told him.

"You're an acquaintance of his?" Katsuragi asked.

"Well, I wouldn't say we're really well-acquainted, but… something like that."

"Ah, I see. Horikita from Class D is the president's little sister, hmm?" Katsuragi had arrived at that conclusion rather quickly. "In that case, it might be better for you to accompany me, if time permits. Would you mind?"

With that, I more or less understood what Katsuragi was after.

"What a coincidence. I also happen to have some business with the student council," I replied.

"Is that why you're wearing your uniform?" he asked.

Of course, I'd only worn it to discover Katsuragi's intentions. Now, however, I thought I should be able to slip into the student council room easily and get close.

Katsuragi nodded. Leaving the others behind, we headed toward the school building.

"Pardon the intrusion," said Katsuragi in a loud, clear voice, as he knocked on the council room door. Student council president Horikita Manabu and Secretary Tachibana greeted us. The older Horikita immediately noticed my presence.

"It would seem we have some unexpected visitors."

I bowed slightly in greeting. Secretary Tachibana looked

disgusted.

“I came here today with a request. I heard that student requests go through the student council,” began Katsuragi.

“Apparently, you stopped by yesterday. The day before, as well. We were absent because the room was being renovated. I apologize,” explained the elder Horikita.

“Oh no, it’s quite all right. It’s summer vacation. The fault is mine. However, I’m glad to meet with you today. I was afraid I’d have to go directly to your dormitory to find you,” Katsuragi continued.

Why did Katsuragi want to come to the student council office in the middle of summer vacation? What exactly was he after?

“The school forbids students to establish contact with anyone on the outside while we’re enrolled here. I’ve come to inquire further into that.”

“It sounds as though you’ve looked through the school regulations. No, outside contact is not allowed, unless there is a compelling reason such as severe illness or injury.”

“Right. However, I’d like to send a package and message to my family off-campus. Of course, I don’t expect a reply,” said Katsuragi.

He was describing one-sided communication, then?

“Even if communication is one-sided, it’s still not permitted,” the president replied, in a very professional manner.

However, Katsuragi wouldn’t have come to the student council room if he could be discouraged that easily. “I heard that the rules about cutting off contact don’t apply to packages. Surely, if what is sent doesn’t include any text, information, or communication, that wouldn’t break the rules, would it?”

“The rules prohibit it. The restrictions exist for a reason. When the school was founded, the rules weren’t quite as strict as they are now,” the elder Horikita explained. He looked at Secretary Tachibana and nodded.

“It’s just as the president says. Originally, shipping a package would’ve been permitted. However, several students broke their promises. They hid letters in their packages without first seeking permission. So, such contact is now completely banned,” she said.

“And there you have it,” added the elder Horikita, dashing Katsuragi’s hopes with complete and utter rejection.

Katsuragi wasn’t ready to back down. Even though he was a first year, he was still tasked with leading Class A. He immediately reassessed the situation and composed himself.

“I must ask you once again. Please allow me to request direct shipping at the store itself. I will pay for the package to be sent to an address of my choosing, and nothing else. I won’t even touch the item. Under those restrictions, there’s no way for me to commit fraud.”

“But that still violates the rules—”

“Violates the rules? This school is all about fostering one’s abilities. I’ve heard that you can do anything, with enough points. You can buy test scores, or even trade with other students. Points have many uses. Am I wrong?” he asked.

“That makes things slightly different.” Katsuragi’s words changed Horikita’s brother’s attitude. “Before we discuss an expenditure of points, can you tell me whom you’d like to send this to?”

“My twin sister. Since we’re orphans, I’m the only one who celebrates her birthday,” replied Katsuragi.

That reason was entirely different from the sleazy theories we’d passed around earlier.

“I must make one correction to your theory. The point system is not all-powerful. It’s certainly possible to use points to buy test scores or barter with other students, but those things are never explicitly mentioned in the rules. The things that *are* explicitly prohibited can’t be easily altered using points. Without the school’s permission, it’s just impossible,” Horikita explained.

“Well, that’s odd. If that’s true, the rules are full of holes.”

“There’s nothing odd. The school purposefully made rules that allow for loopholes,” Horikita responded immediately, as if this were easy to understand.

“……”

The president was a tricky opponent, even for a quick-witted man like Katsuragi. The difference in their positions was stark.

Horikita, who was a third year, in Class A, and the student council president, had no weaknesses.

"So, you're saying that there's nothing I can do?" asked Katsuragi.

"Correct. If school rules forbid something, you cannot circumvent them, even with points."

Katsuragi had probably been prepared to spend a large sum, but this looked like the end of the line.

"If you're finished, please leave."

"I see. I understand. Well then, if you'll please excuse me."

Katsuragi glanced over at me just once. When I gestured that I was going to stay behind, he quietly left the room.

"You're not going?" asked Horikita.

"Earlier, you were talking about what happens when a rule violation is exposed, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember an incident that occurred a while ago? Sudou, from our class, fought with some students from Class C."

Horikita nodded. It'd been a huge deal, after all.

"Back then, the case went to trial precisely because the Class C students appealed to the school. Katsuragi, on the other hand, hasn't done anything wrong. He only wanted to ask about doing something that could potentially break the rules. Only you two, Katsuragi, and I are aware of this. Shouldn't you be able to overlook this particular instance?"

I chose my words carefully, but I was sure they understood what I was getting at. Say you committed a traffic violation; you'd be questioned by a police officer, but you could bribe the officer to overlook the issue.

"Shipping a package would normally be difficult, but it's probably a simple matter for you. Right?" I asked.

"I see. You want to resolve everything without involving the school," Horikita replied. Someone as upstanding as Katsuragi would probably never think of using such a loophole.

“Violating the rules! What a terrible delinquent you are,” Secretary Tachibana cried. I did my best to ignore her.

“How did you arrive at this conclusion?” asked Horikita.

“The school rules state that violent acts are forbidden. However, when we first met, you showed no mercy, did you? You proved that, as long as the school doesn’t know, you can get away with anything,” I answered.

President or not, Horikita definitely shouldn’t have raised his hand to strike someone in public.

“That’s right. There’s only one way to contact someone on the outside. But Katsuragi didn’t realize that, and he missed his chance,” admitted Horikita.

“Will you help him now?” I asked.

“Not at all. I won’t violate the rules for his sake.”

“You’re pretty strict.”

“If you think so, you should have told Katsuragi about the loophole before he left. But you didn’t.”

Dealing with such a clever guy was a pain. He saw through me completely. He understood that I had avoided warning Katsuragi.

“Well, I’m done cooling off. I’m gonna head back,” I said.

“I could ask Tachibana to prepare some tea, if you like?”

“No thanks. I have no idea what you’ll put in it, anyway.”

“Wh-what an incredibly rude first-year student!” Tachibana stammered.

For some reason, as I left, Horikita’s brother accompanied me to the exit.

“Officially, I didn’t meet with Katsuragi today. Even if you act behind the scenes, I won’t investigate. Do what you will,” he said.

“I don’t really feel like doing anything, though.”

“I’m simply telling you that I won’t get involved.”

I had the go-ahead to deceive the school as best I could. Horikita’s gaze cut right through me. He probably saw everything.

“Jeez, the president is shrewd,” I muttered.

3.8

When I returned to the dorm lobby, Katsuragi was sitting there, looking depressed. He immediately noticed me coming and stood.

"I'm sorry for involving you in such a strange errand," he said.

"Ah, don't worry. I insisted on tagging along. Sorry I couldn't help," I replied.

"Oh no, not at all. It was hopeless, anyway," said Katsuragi.

It seemed Katsuragi had given up. He'd wanted to get the present to his sister, no matter what, but the school regulations deterred him.

"Here. Eat these with your friends. I don't really care for sweets," he said, handing over the present. However, I didn't take it.

"It's wasted on me."

"I see. I suppose you wouldn't be happy with a secondhand gift." Katsuragi bowed slightly and began to head back to his room.

"Katsuragi."

I stopped him in his tracks.

"What's the matter?"

"Maybe I can help. I've thought of a way to deliver the present to your sister."

"But the student council rejected me. I can't imagine there's a solution."

"That's because you don't want to break the rules," I replied.

"I'm not going to do something that risky," answered Katsuragi flatly.

"I think it's worth hearing me out. Especially if giving your sister that present is important." Katsuragi had gone repeatedly to the student council room during summer vacation to get

permission. This clearly wasn't trivial to him.

"Is this something we should be discussing in public?" Katsuragi looked around at the people and security cameras.

"I suppose you're right. Want to come to my room?"

People waltzed in and out of my room all the time, anyway. Fortunately, we didn't encounter any students as we made our way there. I opened the door and turned on the lights.

"Come on in."

"You have quite a clean room. Or, rather, I should say it's spartan. It looks the same as when we first arrived at the school," mused Katsuragi.

"I get that a lot."

After he sat, I turned on the air conditioner and poured some tea.

"Earlier, you said something about the school rules?" asked Katsuragi.

"Let's say that you wanted to send a package from school. Since that's generally prohibited, it's not a simple thing to do. You probably wouldn't be able to go through the post office, either." There *was* a post office on campus, but it was mainly for teacher use. Students didn't go there.

"But then, there's nothing I can do. Or are you saying that there's another means of delivery?"

"There is. If you just carry the present off campus, you'll be fine."

"Don't be ridiculous. Who could do something like that? You're not thinking about a campus employee, are you?" asked Katsuragi. Only employees at the various campus shops were allowed to freely come and go. "The people who work here are employed under strict regulations. They wouldn't take a risk like that for a mere student. They might report us to the school."

If they did, Katsuragi would be punished severely.

"That's not going to happen. I don't think there's anyone we could trust to act as a go-between."

"Wait. You're not saying *we* should leave the school grounds

without permission, are you?"

"Of course not. The punishment would be incredibly severe." The entrances and exits were rigorously monitored. We'd be expelled if discovered. "You're right that we can't use an employee. However, a student is a different story. There are several we can trust."

"A student? That's even more unlikely, though. Students aren't allowed to leave without a compelling reason."

"Aren't there exceptions related to those 'compelling reasons'?"

"Exceptions? If the student could leave the campus, then… No, it couldn't be!" Katsuragi quickly arrived at the conclusion I'd been leading him toward. "Club tournaments, hmm?"

"That's right."

During club tournaments, the school had to allow certain students to leave the school grounds and travel to outside venues.

"You're certainly right. In a situation like that, it *would* be possible. However, the school would definitely anticipate that kind of thing. There will be bag inspections," reasoned Katsuragi.

"Of course. But there are ways to get past those, aren't there? It's not like the Olympics testing athletes for steroids. They wouldn't search every square inch of your body."

"That's true, but…"

Katsuragi appeared to be seriously considering the idea.

"That would be a huge risk for the student. However, judging by what you've said, Ayanokouji, you have a talented, trustworthy individual in mind. Yes?"

"Yep, that's right. However, you need to trust me if we want this to work."

3.9

An hour later, I contacted Sudou as he returned from club activities. He was participating in a tournament the day after tomorrow, and Katsuragi and I needed his help.

“Huh? Don’t give me that bullshit. Seriously, who in their right mind would want to do something like that?” huffed Sudou. He rejected the proposal so strongly that he practically spit out the words. Of course, if someone discovered that he’d violated the rules, there was no telling what penalty he’d face.

“Besides, I ain’t obliged to listen to a request from baldy over here,” he added.

“What now?” Katsuragi didn’t seem to trust Sudou. He still appeared generally skeptical of the plan.

“Putting aside whether you’ll do it, I want to ask you something, Sudou. What kind of inspections does the school perform?”

“Dunno,” he replied flippantly. Sudou didn’t appear to grasp the situation yet.

“Depending how things go, Katsuragi might give you a reward,” I said.

“A reward?” echoed Sudou.

“That’s right. I knew that I would need to pay, of course,” replied Katsuragi.

Sudou began to give the matter serious thought.

“They check our bags in the morning, before we get on the bus to the tournament. After that, they confiscate our phones. When we get to the stadium, we get changed and head onto the court. As for meals, we eat there, when the tournament’s over. I don’t know more exact details, though,” Sudou explained.

“What about the changing area? And the bags?” I asked.

“Normally, we use the lockers n’ stuff. When we change, there

ain't any teachers around, but they do keep a strict watch on us. We even have separate bathrooms, so we can't talk to students from another school," Sudou continued.

Katsuragi listened intently.

"That all sounds quite strict. I doubt it's a good idea to even bring bags with you in the first place," he reasoned.

"Is it okay to bring food?" I asked.

"Yeah, if we want. Some people do," Sudou replied.

"If that's true, then it actually sounds reasonably simple to transport the gift." I grabbed a lunchbox and water bottle from my shelf, then returned to my seat. "I'll put it inside the lunchbox. It should just about fit. As for the bag, I'll roll it up and put it in the water bottle. That way, no one should find out."

The teachers wouldn't go so far as to check the contents of someone's lunch.

"Wait. Even if I bring the gift along, how am I gonna send it? I ain't got any money or time," Sudou pointed out.

"If you're worried about money, don't be. Just use this." I handed him an invoice I'd picked up from the post office. "Watch for an opening, and then use that opportunity to mail it."

"You say that like it's easy. That's the hardest part, right?" Sudou retorted.

"Well, the risks are potentially great," said Katsuragi.

Not only would Katsuragi be violating school rules, he'd involved Sudou. Normally, Katsuragi would have backed out by now, but this must've been too important. That spoke to just how meaningful his sister was to him.

"Unfortunately, I can't trust anyone in my class to handle something like this. Would you help?" Katsuragi asked Sudou.

"Sudou, I know you wouldn't normally do this. But it has significant benefits, don't you think?" I asked.

"Benefits? You mean the reward?"

Katsuragi nodded. "I'll pay you 100,000 points if you succeed."

That was quite an amazing offer. Sudou stiffened. For someone who struggled day to day on about 1,000 or 2,000 points, 100,000 was an incredible amount.

“Why do you want to go so far to deliver a package?” asked Sudou. The reward made him wary.

“I have a twin sister. Ayanokouji knows that much,” said Katsuragi.

I did. The rest of the reason, however, was far weightier than I expected.

“My sister is sickly. Because our parents and grandparents have passed, our relatives currently care for her. I’m something of a substitute parent. If I don’t celebrate her birthday, who will?” asked Katsuragi. “I understood the school rules when I enrolled, but I thought I’d be able to send a package. That was my mistake. However, I still want to give my sister a gift, no matter what.”

“So, that’s why you came to me, huh?” Sudou grabbed my shoulder, whispering in a loud enough voice that Katsuragi could hear. “What am I gonna do if you decide to betray me? I don’t want something to happen, like with Class C, you know?”

That was right. Sudou had fallen into a trap, and as a result, was almost kicked out of the basketball club.

“There’s no need to worry. I’m sure he’s already thought about that,” I told Sudou.

Katsuragi nodded.

“I’ll offer you 20,000 points now, as advance payment. I will pay the remaining 80,000 points as a reward after you complete the task.”

The 20,000-point payment would prove that Katsuragi was complicit in the act. If either party betrayed the other, they’d both suffer the consequences.

“So, 20,000 as an advance? But…”

Even though that was a large sum, I understood why Sudou would hesitate. He was thinking about his future in basketball. If the school learned he’d violated the rules during basketball activities, he might even be struck from the team.

“I think it’s a perfect plan. Obviously, if you are discovered, I would also suffer greatly,” said Katsuragi. The school would probably punish him just as harshly as Sudou. This plan wouldn’t work unless Katsuragi had the resolve to see it through, but I believed he did.

“So, the issue is just whether I get found out, huh?” Sudou weighed his options, thinking about the high number of points involved. What would he do?

His eyes briefly flickered toward me. He appeared to have decided.

“All right. All I gotta do is take a package? I guess I’m someone who’ll take that risk,” he said.

“Are you sure?” asked Katsuragi. Sudou had become his unanticipated savior.

“I mean, since you told me about your sickly sister and all, it’s kinda hard for me to turn ya down.” Sudou scratched his head, looking sympathetic.

However, Katsuragi showed no sign of joy. He stood there in silence, crossing his arms and looking stern.

“The hell? I already told you I’d do it. Is there something else?” asked Sudou.

“Maybe he still has doubts. Maybe he’s wondering whether we’ll betray him,” I pointed out.

“Seriously? Katsuragi’s the one who came asking for help, and now he doubts *me* ?” Sudou balked.

Katsuragi was the type to prioritize playing it safe. Maybe it was just his nature to grow more and more suspicious the longer things went well. Of course, I already knew that. Unfortunately, it was needless anxiety. Sudou wasn’t a duplicitous person. Really, the same went for me, too. I’d never once thought about laying a trap for Katsuragi during all this. I genuinely believed there was value in having Katsuragi owe us one.

Besides, even if Katsuragi betrayed us, we could take him down as well. I’d introduced Sudou as an intermediary after reaching that conclusion. I hadn’t known how many points Katsuragi was going to offer, but 100,000 points was quite tasty.

“Just to be safe, I won’t transfer the points directly to Sudou. Instead, they’ll go to Ayanokouji. I’m sorry, Ayanokouji, but I’d like you to transfer the points to Sudou after he succeeds,” explained Katsuragi.

“Why do we need to go through all this trouble?” asked Sudou.

“Insurance, I guess,” I answered.

If someone from the school saw Sudou taking out or mailing the gift, and the school then saw a large number of points deposited into his account, they’d naturally be suspicious. However, if the points went through another person, they wouldn’t be traced back to Katsuragi. Sudou looked a little irritated, but gave his consent.

“There’s one more thing. I want ironclad proof you aren’t lying to me,” said Katsuragi.

“Huh? The hell?” Sudou huffed.

“I can’t be certain whether you’ll deliver the gift.” Katsuragi was still worried that Sudou was playing him. Because he couldn’t contact his family on the outside, he’d have to wait until he graduated to find out if his sister had received the present.

I’d thought of several ways to provide “proof.” The simplest and most reliable method would be photographic evidence via cell phone. However, mentioning that gave me pause. I didn’t want to mess up and get Katsuragi’s attention for the wrong reasons.

“The hell, dude? Ain’t no way I’d lie ’bout it. You dumb or something?”

“Of course I want to believe you. But we haven’t established that kind of relationship yet,” explained Katsuragi. He crossed his arms. “How about you use your phone? I’d like you to record a video the moment you send the package.”

Apparently Katsuragi and I were of one mind.

“Dude, didn’t you listen to me? I already told you the team’s phones get confiscated,” Sudou snapped.

“Of course. That’s why I would like your cooperation in this matter as well, Ayanokouji.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

“There’s still space in the water bottle. Put your phone inside. If we do that, Sudou can take it with him without being discovered,” Katsuragi explained.

As a general rule, each student was assigned one phone. If Sudou handed his over during the bag search, there wouldn’t be any further suspicion.

“Of course, I intend to offer you a reward, too,” Katsuragi added.

He said he’d pay me 10,000 points. Not a bad deal.

“I understand. I’ll do it.”

“You sure, Ayanokouji?” Sudou asked.

“Yeah. I can help, so I’ll do it. Besides, the points’ll be useful to me, too.”

“Well, I leave everything to you, then,” said Katsuragi.

He bowed deeply and gratefully before leaving the room.

“Man, now I’m nervous,” Sudou sighed.

“You okay, Sudou?”

“This is my second time participating in a tournament. I think I got the hang of things, but…”

I understood why he’d be a little resistant to the idea of helping by breaking the rules. That said, Sudou’s delinquent history gave him a comparatively flexible attitude to this whole ordeal.

“So, when do ya want me to take your phone?”

“Oh. Well, it’ll be easy for the school to trace things back to me, since a lot of points will be deposited into my account. If at all possible, I’d like to use a third party’s phone,” I told him. The best option would be a phone belonging to someone completely unrelated, like Ike or Yamauchi.

“No way anyone’s gonna lend you their phone, though,” said Sudou.

“If I say I’ll pay them 5,000 points, they’ll lend me anything I want.”

“You know, you’re a surprisingly shady guy.”

Sudou and I prepared to deliver the package. To make a long

story short, he successfully avoided the school's detection, passed the bag check without incident, and mailed the gift. He also managed to take a video of the delivery, and to send the file to Katsuragi before deleting it. I don't know whether Katsuragi's sister received her present, but the parts we controlled went well. Sudou handled everything perfectly.

I wondered if Horikita's older brother had a hand in that. He must have been aware that we were going to try something. Being the student council president, he should've been able to make the necessary arrangements. On the flip side, he also could have observed the exact moment Sudou violated the school rules.

Maybe I was imagining things, but I wanted to know the truth. If the president's involvement was a possibility, a greater truth might emerge one day.

3.10

After Katsuragi left Ayanokouji's room, he used the elevator to head back to his floor. When he arrived, two male students stood outside his room, seemingly waiting for him.

"What are you doing?" Katsuragi asked.

"Oh! You're finally back, Katsuragi! Jeez, you're late. Jerk!"

"Hmm? You're Class D students, aren't you?" Katsuragi had his doubts about these two, even though he seemed to remember them from somewhere.

"Meh, that's not important! Anyway, congratulations!"

Pop ! Katsuragi was assaulted by party poppers.

"Wh-what's going on?!"

"What do you mean? Your birthday's coming up soon, right?! So, we came to celebrate!"

"Celebrate? But you're from Class D. Why? You don't have any reason to." Katsuragi grew flustered.

"We've got a reason. I mean, we're all virgins here, so let's be friends. Right?"

Katsuragi flinched at Ike's vulgar language as Ike handed over a birthday present.

"Here, eat this. Our idol, Kushida Kikyou-chan, chose this birthday cake!"

"B-but I can't accept…"

"Dude, it's all right, it's all right!" Ike forcefully shoved the box into Katsuragi's hands.

"Welp, see ya!"

With that, the Class D students ran away. All that remained were the party popper remnants and the cake.

"They said it was a cake, but it's actually rather warm," muttered Katsuragi.

He opened the box to see a room-temperature chocolate ice cream cake, which had melted into viscous sludge.

“Is this some new form of harassment?”

Katsuragi imagined it was.

Chapter 4:
Dangers Lurk in Everyday Life

It all began at 6:00 P.M. on a certain day. A text message from the school informed us that the entire dormitory wouldn't have water for quite a while, due to trouble with the water department. I turned the faucet to confirm, and nothing came out.

It sounded as though the repair work wouldn't finish until the early morning. In the meantime, the school was taking the necessary steps to provide for its students. It would hand out two liters or more of water in the cafeteria as needed, although the text warned us that the cafeteria was expected to be crowded as a result. The convenience stores were temporarily unavailable, but the Keyaki Mall would provide free drinking water. However, we were prohibited from bottling the water and taking it home. That really wasn't an issue for me, though.

No, my big problem would be the toilet. Even though there was water in the tank, we had to be cautious, since we could only flush once.

The tea in the refrigerator should have been enough for one cup, which could get me through the day. As for dinner, I'd cook something without using any water. I'd just started prepping dinner when my phone suddenly rang. The moment I went to answer it, it stopped after two rings.

I saw that Horikita Suzune had called. It was unusual for her to reach out. Even if Horikita had some business with me, she generally texted. Curious, I decided to call her back. However, no matter how many times the phone rang, Horikita didn't answer.

I did think it was strange, but I decided to give up. I placed my phone on the table and went back to making dinner. Since I already had rice on hand, I settled on fried rice as a simple option. Once I added the egg, the finishing touches were all that remained.

Suddenly, my phone rang again.

By the time I turned off the burner and went to my phone, the ringing stopped. Another call from Horikita. I tried calling back again, but she didn't answer. This was getting suspicious.

Maybe Horikita just happened to become busy right after she tried calling? Considering her personality, it was hard to imagine that was the case. She was the type of person who called only when calm. Even if something had happened, ending the call twice in a row, and not picking up afterward, was strange. I concluded that Horikita had probably been caught off guard by something unexpected.

"Yeah, right," I muttered.

Exasperated at myself for reading too deeply into Horikita's call, I decided to stop cooking for a bit and send her a text.

Hey, looks like you tried calling me twice. Did you want something?

The read receipt instantly popped up, but no reply came. I waited for quite a while, but there was nothing.

I'm cooking right now, so I might not respond right away. Just text me, and I'll get back to you.

Once again, the read receipt popped up, but she didn't reply. I went back to my dinner.

4.1

By the time I finished eating, I still hadn't heard from Horikita. As I drank the last of my barley tea, I started feeling like something was wrong.

"She couldn't be… She's not really in danger, is she?"

Could she have collapsed somewhere? This whole thing was atypical of Horikita, without a doubt. Was her phone malfunctioning? If so, she could just have contacted the school.

If I knew someone close enough to Horikita to go to her room and check on her, this would have been over quickly. Sadly, I couldn't think of anyone who fit the bill.

Are you okay? I texted.

I had to find out what was going on.

"Oh…"

The read notification didn't appear. The situation had changed. Maybe her phone's battery had run out, or her phone had automatically shut off.

What other possibilities existed, though? The fact that Horikita called in the first place still weighed on me. Why? It was also strange that she hadn't said what was going on.

Logically, my first thought was that Horikita had some business with me, but had been interrupted by something else. A teacher might've called her, or a classmate. But that theory was very shaky. It was hard to imagine someone from the school calling Horikita in the middle of the summer, especially at night. She didn't have any friends who'd contact her that way.

Maybe some accident had stopped the call. Or she just fell asleep and forgot to call me back. That might have been it.

"That doesn't fit."

Horikita was a gifted and focused student. I couldn't see her forgetting to reply.

“I’m worried.”

In the end, my options were limited, but I was too concerned to just let things be. For the time being, I decided to try calling Horikita again. I dialed her number. On the fourth try, I finally managed to connect.

“Hello?” Horikita didn’t seem surprised. If anything, she actually sounded tired.

“Hey. Sorry for calling a bunch of times. I was worried, since you tried calling me. Were you sleeping?” I asked.

“No, I wasn’t. I’m sorry for not replying.”

I didn’t hear any hint of panic, nor did I get the feeling she’d had an accident.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something right now,” she continued.

I heard a metallic *thunk* over the phone.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Nothing to worry about. Goodbye.”

She abruptly ended the call. Well, at least I managed to get in touch with her, and she said that everything was fine. I decided to forget about this for the time being.

4.2

I thought that was that, but around 9:00 P.M., my phone lit up. A new message.

Are you awake? read Horikita's text.

I'm awake.

I'd like to talk to you. Do you have time? It was roughly two hours after we'd last talked.

I'll call you.

Horikita picked up on the first ring.

"What's up?" I asked.

"There's something I wanted to ask you."

As before, Horikita sounded tired. She paused before speaking again.

"Let's say that there was a turtle," she began.

"Huh?"

Horikita launched into a completely crazy story.

"It's an extremely smart and talented turtle. If I accidentally hit it, and flipped it onto its back, that would be terrible, wouldn't you agree? It couldn't right itself under its own steam."

"I suppose. But actually, in most cases, turtles can extend their necks and use their legs to flip over. The only turtles that absolutely can't right themselves are giant tortoises and sea turtles," I explained.

"……"

Horikita fell silent at my unnecessary explanation.

"This would have been easier if you'd just assumed that turtles can't get up on their own and listened to me," she said after a moment.

Yeah. That made sense.

“Okay. So, they can’t get up on their own. Is something wrong with that?”

“In such a situation, what would you do?”

“I’d probably flip the turtle over. It’s not that much trouble.”

I wouldn’t have any reason to save the turtle, but I wouldn’t have any reason to abandon it, either. I thought I might as well extend a helping hand. However, I wondered what exactly Horikita was getting at. Maybe she was in trouble, like the turtle that couldn’t get up on its own?

I didn’t get the impression that she was panicking, though. She seemed calm. That probably meant this wasn’t a pressing issue.

“So, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not upset or anything,” she replied.

“Well, it sure *sounds* like that’s where this is headed.”

“I was just talking about a turtle on its back. It had nothing to do with me.”

“Okay. Then why are we talking about a turtle?”

“I just…wanted to talk to you about a turtle that flipped over,” she insisted.

Okay, this was getting weird.

“This isn’t like you,” I said. “Well, I guess asking for help isn’t like you, either, but… You called me because you don’t have anyone else to go to, right? If that’s the case, then just come out and say why.”

Horikita paused.

“If you say that you can’t prevent wanting to help people, then perhaps I can’t go to you for advice,” she said.

“Huh? It’s fine. Talk to me,” I told her.

“I’m just having a little trouble.”

At least she’d finally admitted it. “Where are you now?”

“I’m in my room.”

“Wait. Are there bugs?”

If that were the case, I understood why Horikita didn’t want to

talk about it. I was probably right on the money, although the dormitories were generally kept clean, and Horikita lived on an upper floor—actually, that made the likelihood of bugs rather low.

"That's not it. I could deal with a bug myself."

"How would you deal with it? Detergent? Hot water? Slippers?" No matter how good my powers of deductive reasoning were, I couldn't imagine Horikita's current situation.

"Well, I'm in trouble because… No, it's fine after all. I'll take care of it."

"You say you'll take care of it yourself, but it's been more than two hours, and you haven't done anything yet, right?" I shot back. If she'd called with this problem earlier, then she'd been struggling for quite some time.

"Well. Well… It's true that I'm just about at my physical limit. I'll tell you everything."

Finally.

Instead of explaining, however, Horikita suddenly made a request. "Could you come to my room?"

She sounded both embarrassed and disgusted.

"Now? But it's already past nine," I protested.

"I understand, but…to deal with this, you need to be here." Horikita spoke as though she was frustrated or in pain.

"Well, I might get in trouble for going to the girls' floor at this time of night," I said.

"I know, but I can't do this unless you're here," she replied.

With that, Horikita abruptly hung up.

"This is kinda scary. But I guess I have to go," I muttered.

Grabbing only my phone and room key, I hurried out. Wouldn't want to keep her waiting.

4.3

I didn't want to run into any other girls, so I waited until no one else was using the elevator. Sneaking around like that was pathetic, but hey. That was me. I managed to reach the thirteenth floor undetected. When I got to Horikita's room, I rang the doorbell. After waiting a while, I tried to slowly open the door myself. It wasn't locked.

"Horikita?"

Horikita's place was a one-bedroom and kitchen model, but I couldn't see into the bedroom area. It was hidden behind a closed door. There was no sign of Horikita in the kitchen or hallway. Like me, she'd barely decorated since moving in.

"You're alone, right?" I heard her voice from behind the bedroom door.

"You're being way too loud," I told her.

"It's okay. Even if someone came in right now, I'd conk them with my right hand," she replied.

What in the world was *that* supposed to mean? Cautiously, I entered Horikita's bedroom. She had her back to me, so I couldn't see her expression. The room was decorated simply. Nothing seemed particularly strange.

"Okay, I'm here. What's the problem?" I asked.

"Once you see, you'll understand."

Horikita slowly stood and turned to face me. Two radically different emotions coursed through me at the exact same time.

"I see. So. That's it, huh?"

"That's it, yes."

I felt some secondhand embarrassment as I looked at her right hand, which was completely stuck inside a small water bottle.

"How do I say this? This is completely unlike you. Don't tell me you were just playing around."

“Don’t be dumb.”

“This is like when you challenge yourself to use your fingers to pick up a single piece of corn, right?”

That must’ve irritated her, because she swung her right arm at me.

“I-It’s just a joke.”

“There’s no point telling an unfunny joke. You failed.”

“It wasn’t funny because I was teasing you, right?”

“This water bottle got stuck because I tried to wash my hand. Can you help me get it off?”

So, that was what happened. I grabbed the water bottle and pulled, but only ended up pulling Horikita toward me.

“Come on. If you don’t pull back yourself, you’re gonna stay stuck. At least give it a little elbow grease,” I said.

“I already know that. It’s just that I’m tired. Let’s get this over with quickly,” she replied.

After trying to free herself on her own for more than two hours, Horikita was exhausted. I grabbed the water bottle again, put a little more strength into it, and pulled. Horikita pulled back as I did so, enduring the pain. However, her arm remained stuck.

“It’s no use. At this rate, the bottle will never come off,” I told her.

“I see. I suppose I expected as much.” Horikita appeared to have resigned herself to being trapped.

“Guess we have to rub your arm down with soap and slowly pull the bottle off. Let’s head to the kitchen,” I said.

“Did you forget that there’s a water outage right now?”

That was right. We wouldn’t have water until twelve. The only usable water was in the toilet, but Horikita probably wouldn’t like that.

“I’ll go to the cafeteria.”

We were low on options, but as long as I could get some water, we could remove the bottle. I left Horikita’s room and headed straight for the cafeteria. However, an unfortunate surprise awaited me there.

“I’m very sorry. So many students came that we’re all out,” said the cafeteria lady.

Apparently, those who’d needed water for dinner had taken all of it. Well then, I’d just go buy some at the vending machine. I didn’t need a lot of water to free someone’s arm from a bottle. About two drinking glasses’ worth would be enough.

I walked toward the vending machines, and discovered that our misfortune was just beginning. All the water, tea, and juice were sold out.

“I’ve never seen a completely sold-out vending machine before,” I muttered.

4.4

"You're empty-handed?"

Horikita, the water-bottle woman, glared at me, but it didn't matter. This tragedy was born of multiple misfortunes.

"So, what are we going to do now?"

"If you're okay with it, we could ask Ike or Sudou for water."

"Pass," she replied.

I'd thought that was how she'd reply.

"I could lie and say it's for me."

"I'm opposed to using any water they might have. Who knows what they've put in it?" she muttered.

She was treating them like harmful germs or something. I wanted to disagree, but lacked the confidence. Those guys did tend to leave uncovered tea and water

lying around. They'd probably try to rustle up clean water for Horikita's sake, but they might be a lot less considerate if I said *I* wanted water. Friendly malice was a diabolical thing.

"Okay. Want to try one more time?"

"Yes. Even if it hurts," she replied.

Horikita offered her right arm, bracing herself. She wanted her freedom as soon as possible. I saw sweat trickle down her arm.

"Okay, I'm going to get a really good grip on it."

I wanted to free Horikita and return to my own room, so I grabbed the water bottle tightly, putting myself in a ridiculous pose. I pulled twice as hard as I had the last time. Horikita looked as though she was in agony, but endured it without complaint. However, the bottle didn't budge.

"I guess we really do need water," I said.

The bottle probably wasn't going to come off unless we made Horikita's arm slippery. If it was stuck after that, we might need to

contact emergency services.

“You’re telling me to wait until twelve? Like this?”

“Well, the only reliable guy left is Hirata,” I said.

“I wouldn’t have any concerns about the quality of Hirata’s water, but…I dislike the idea of owing him a debt,” replied Horikita.

“Well, I’ll say I’m the one who needs water, for appearance’s sake. It won’t be your problem,” I told her.

“I suppose that’s true,” she answered.

Horikita still sounded somewhat dissatisfied, but appeared to accept the fact that you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs. I tried to call Hirata. No matter how many times the phone rang, however, he didn’t pick up. Even when I tried to send him a chat message, it went unread.

“Maybe he’s asleep. I’m not getting a response.”

“I see. My emotions are a mixture of joy and despair,” she replied.

“Well, we probably don’t have any other options. I think we can only rely on Kushida or Sakura.”

“Please ask Sakura-san,” replied Horikita immediately.

“Are you still on bad terms with Kushida?”

“There’s no reason for us to get along. Besides, there are still quite a few things about her that I can’t accept,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘can’t accept’?”

“The test on the ship. She abandoned the idea of trying to win right from the start. She wanted the Dragon group to end with a draw.”

Horikita crossed her arms as she recalled the events of the previous test. Unfortunately, she still had her hand stuck in the bottle, so her declaration lacked impact.

“That’s because she’s a pacifist. She was probably choosing the option where everyone ended up happy,” I reasoned.

“I had no intention of completely rejecting Outcome #1. But it was something entirely different for the VIP herself to steer us

toward it," Horikita answered sharply.

During the test, students had been separated into twelve groups. We'd played a game where we had to discover the hidden identity of a chosen VIP within each group, with four possible outcomes in total. The most difficult outcome to achieve was Outcome #1, which required everyone in the group to discover the VIP's identity and wait till the assigned time to submit their answers, without anyone betraying the group by turning in an answer early. The group that achieved Outcome #1 would have 500,000 private points awarded to each member, and a million private points awarded to its VIP.

The only drawback to Outcome #1 was that the VIP's class wasn't awarded any class points.

"Kushida being our group's VIP gave Class D the advantage. All we had to do was keep the VIP's identity hidden, but everyone found out that Kushida-san was the VIP. I think that Kushida herself had something to do with that."

"But that's just speculation on your part."

"Yes. The possibility remains, though. Therefore, I assume she's guilty."

Horikita's words grew forceful. I understood how she felt, but the seriousness was lessened, since Horikita's arm was still stuck in that water bottle. I needed to tread carefully.

"I understand how you feel, but that won't do," I said.

"You mean, me saying all this without any evidence?"

"I'm saying that situation was your responsibility, too. Let's assume that, yes, Kushida betrayed us. If so, then you're at fault for *allowing* her to betray us. You have to win at all costs. Am I wrong?"

Horikita seemed to understand what I meant. Nevertheless, she objected. "Don't be absurd. Don't you understand how unrealistic that is?"

"Unrealistic? I can't imagine why it would be. If Kushida did manipulate you all into Outcome #1, that's honestly amazing. In other words, she completely outdid you in the exam."

Of course, this was all assuming that Kushida had truly betrayed the Dragon group. Honestly, it'd probably been Ryuuen or

Katsuragi. I didn't know which. Either way, someone with more power had forced everyone in the Dragon group into a certain outcome. Still, the fact remained that Horikita had been outsmarted.

"The VIP was in your class. If you didn't act because you were confident in your victory, then the responsibility lies with the people on your team. If you're aiming for Class A, you need to be able to manage people better," I added.

"You're talking about very complicated things," Horikita countered.

"I understand that you're frustrated. But this is the path you chose. Besides, you're maturing. If I'd said the same thing to you when we first met, you wouldn't have listened to me at all."

That was true. Slowly, Horikita was beginning to think like an adult. She was no longer a girl who rejected everything around her on instinct.

"I understand. I accept the test results. Perhaps I was too optimistic. But, right now, my main objective is getting my arm free," she huffed.

"I suppose I'll see if Sakura can help."

Since it was getting late, I decided to reach out to Sakura using chat.

Sakura, my room is out of drinking water. The vending machine is sold out, too. Would you mind sharing with me?

I waited for a while after sending the message, but saw no indication that Sakura had read it.

"No good. I don't know if she's asleep or what."

"Honestly, today is just not my day," Horikita sighed.

"I take it you want the bottle off right now?"

"If I planned to wait, I wouldn't have called you."

"Then you have to take a risk, too," I said.

"Risk?" Horikita was instantly wary.

"We'll head to Keyaki Mall for water. There's no other way."

"So, that's our final option." Horikita put her hand to her

forehead. Honestly, no matter what tragic pose she assumed, she still looked ridiculous.

"Most people are eating right now, so this is our chance." As a matter of fact, I hadn't bumped into any of our classmates this evening.

"I can't take the risk. Can't you ask one of your friends?" she urged.

"Unfortunately, I can't. I think they made plans to go out for karaoke. They're not here."

"This is not my day," she sighed.

"Let's get this over with, then."

"W-wait. I really can't go outside like this," said Horikita.

"In that case, do you want to hide your hand? I guess it's already hidden in a water bottle," I joked.

"That was completely unnecessary," she snapped, and raised her hand as if to strike.

"O-okay, I get it. Please put your hand down. Do you have a cloth or something?"

"Cloth? If a handkerchief counts, I have one." Horikita pulled a white handkerchief off the shelf. I placed it over the water bottle.

"This looks painfully suspicious. It's not large enough to cover everything."

"Don't you have anything bigger?" I asked.

"Will a bath towel do?"

I placed the towel over her arm. "Well, I guess this works."

Honestly, I suspected the bath towel might make her stand out even more.

"If the towel's even a little lopsided, it'll fall off," said Horikita.

"Well, can't you hold it with your free hand?"

Horikita folded the bath towel and held it to her body, giving the impression that she was about to take a bath. Yeah, that looked way better.

“If someone were to see me, what kind of impression would they get?” she asked.

“Hmm…”

No one would normally walk around the dorms with a bath towel, nor take one outside. People would be suspicious.

“Depending on the situation, I suppose they might think you were going to use my bathtub,” I suggested. That might have been a leap of logic, but that was the way I saw it.

“Rejected.”

Horikita took the towel off. I supposed that I didn’t really want anyone to think that about us, either.

“How about putting your hand inside your bag?”

“Rejected. Can’t you think of anything better?” She was peerless when it came to complaining.

“Why don’t we just go there as we are? We’ll avoid worrying about a towel or handkerchief falling down.”

“I suppose so.”

All that was left for us was to act. I peeked into the hallway, taking a slightly hesitant Horikita with me.

“Okay, no sign of anyone. Let’s go,” I said.

“W-wait a minute. I still haven’t put my shoes on.”

Because Horikita could only use one hand, putting on her shoes took quite a bit of time. Finally, the two of us stepped out into the hallway.

“Wait. There’s a faucet on the path to school, right? If we make it there, we’ll be okay.”

If we walked at a normal pace, we’d arrive at the faucet in about five minutes. We’d be fine under the cover of darkness, as long as we got out of the dormitory. We reached the elevators, but —

“It’s no use, Ayanokouji-kun. We can’t use them,” Horikita said.

“What?”

“There’s a surveillance monitor in the first-floor lobby, right? I

don't know who can see us on that."

A monitor on the first floor did display whatever the elevator cameras captured. Horikita was concerned about being seen. Even if she managed to hide her arm, she couldn't avoid looking mysterious.

"Should we take the stairs?"

That would probably take quite a bit of time. Also, the fact that Horikita couldn't use one hand made it a little riskier.

"I'd rather take the stairs than let someone see me," she confessed.

Horikita chose pride over safety. Two emergency stairwells were each located an equal distance from the elevators. No matter which we took, we'd have to pass students' rooms again. There was no getting around that.

I brought Horikita toward the stairwell. She stayed behind me, as if hiding herself from view. I was starting to agree with her words earlier. *"This is not my day,"* indeed.

I heard a door open about three rooms behind us.

"Th-this is bad. That's Maezono-san's room."

Maezono from Class D, huh? There was no way for us to escape. However, Maezono didn't leave the room. Instead, her friend Kushida stepped out. Another piece of bad luck for Horikita.

"Thank you, Kushida-san. I'll return the favor next time!"

"Oh no, it's okay. Don't worry about it. Good night, Maezono-san."

I didn't see Maezono's face. As the door closed with a *ka-chak* , Kushida headed toward the elevator without noticing me or Horikita.

"That was close," Horikita said.

"Yeah."

If Kushida had looked back, she would've noticed us. I was sweating an uncomfortable amount. We were far too conspicuous like this.

We headed to the emergency exit as quickly as possible, but I

heard Maezono's door open once again.

"Kushida-san, you forgot something!" Maezono shouted as she stepped outside. Kushida turned.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun. Horikita-san. Good evening."

"Y-yeah."

Our exchange was brief. It seemed as though Kushida wanted to check on what she forgot. She headed back toward Maezono, and Maezono inevitably noticed us as well. Horikita froze.

"You forgot your phone!"

"Ah, sorry. Thanks! You're a lifesaver."

"Let's get going, Ayanokouji-kun. There's no need for us to linger," said Horikita. She pushed the water bottle against my back, emphasizing that this was our chance.

If Horikita were seen in this state, her pride would be utterly demolished. We reached the emergency exit, and I tried to open the door.

"It won't open."

"You're joking, right? There's no way an emergency exit door wouldn't open, is there?"

"I'm serious. It won't open." Locking an emergency exit was normally prohibited, which meant…

"Where are you going?"

Oh no. Kushida approached us.

"Oh, uh. We were just thinking of taking the stairs."

That was the best answer I could give.

"Oh? But the power's out in the east emergency stairwell right now. I'm pretty sure it isn't usable. It'd be really dangerous to go downstairs in pitch darkness. I think the west stairs are okay, though."

"So, that's why it's locked. Huh," I said.

Horikita said nothing, continuing to hide behind my back.

"Horikita seems to be acting differently than usual. Is something the matter?" asked Kushida.

Horikita raised her voice. “Nothing’s wrong!” she replied curtly.

Her bluntness worked. Kushida stopped.

“I see. Well, if something’s troubling you, please tell me. Okay? Maezono-san was in trouble earlier because she had no water. I have more than enough,” said Kushida.

Kushida had what we wanted most of all. If Horikita could only ask for her help, she’d get water quite easily.

However, Horikita pushed the water bottle into my back like the muzzle of a gun. She didn’t want Kushida’s help.

“Well then, good night to you both,” Kushida said sweetly.

“Yeah, ’night.”

4.5

It took us quite a while to get to the first floor from the thirteenth. We were worried that the lobby might be crowded, but fortunately, no one was around.

"We can go right now," I said.

"Okay."

I made my way toward the exit, Horikita trailing closely behind me.

Then, several male and female students emerged from the darkness, chatting as they walked. They didn't appear to be Class D students, but from Horikita's perspective, it didn't make any difference who they were. We couldn't get out of the dormitory in time. Horikita turned on her heel and started to head back, as if returning to her room.

"At this rate, they're going to see us," she said.

The students drew nearer, their presence hard to ignore. Flustered, Horikita and I opened the door to the west emergency stairs. How unlucky could we be? I heard a voice directly above us. It sounded like a male student on the third or fourth floor, heading downstairs. Students who lived on the lower levels often didn't use the elevators.

No longer able to go upstairs, Horikita and I were forced to return to the lobby.

"We have no choice now but to use the elevator!" Horikita said.

"Is that okay? You'll be seen on the monitors," I said.

"I'll have to use you as cover. Since we know the camera's position, we should be able to do that," replied Horikita.

That suggestion was bizarre, but not impossible. I would rather have avoided it, but since we lacked an escape route, there was no other choice. We hurried to the left elevator and got on. I positioned myself directly in front of the camera, and Horikita stood

behind me, making sure to hide her arm. She was like a ghost clinging to my back.

I hoped observers wouldn't notice anything. At any rate, we needed to get away from the first floor. I pushed a button at random.

"Well, we're safe for now, but…this is just the beginning," I muttered.

"Let's give up. I can't go outside like this. I'll just endure this bottle until the water comes back," said Horikita.

That had to be a tough pill for her to swallow, but if it was what she wanted, we just needed to return to the thirteenth floor. I cancelled the request for a random floor, and pushed the button for the thirteenth. Hopefully our trials were over for tonight.

Then, just as we relaxed, the elevator suddenly slowed. I was having terrible luck with elevators lately. At least it wasn't breaking down, and I hadn't pressed the wrong button.

We had stopped on the fifth floor. That meant that someone had pressed the call button. No matter who got on, they'd see Horikita in this bizarre state. She might've gone undetected in a big crowd of people, but fate continued to be cruel, and the elevator doors opened to reveal a single male student.

Unbelievable. Of all the people we could have encountered…

Kouenji Rokusuke, a Class D student, waltzed into the elevator with his usual haughty air. He went straight to the mirrored wall, not even giving us a passing glance. As he gazed at his reflection, he pulled out a comb he always carried, and started to style his hair.

"Elevator boy. Top floor," he said.

Horikita appeared stunned by Kouenji's incredible display of narcissism. I wanted to say a bunch of things right back at him, but it was probably best to just stay quiet. I pressed the button for the top floor, the elevator doors closed, and we started our ascent once again.

Kouenji showed no sign of paying attention to us. I would've thought that he'd spare us a glance, considering that we were his classmates, but at least that meant he probably wouldn't notice the water bottle.

While Horikita hovered in the camera's blind spot, the elevator passed the tenth floor. I wondered what business Kouenji had on the top floor, but couldn't ask. Maybe he had no real reason for going.

When the elevator doors slowly opened, Horikita and I stepped out simultaneously. Kouenji never once moved his eyes from the mirror. Things had ended without incident.

Horikita rushed straight to her room.

"It's impossible. Walking around outside is completely out of the question," she muttered as she went inside.

I was about to follow her when my phone vibrated.

Sorry for the late reply. I was researching something, so I didn't notice your text, read the message from Sakura.

"Sakura-san?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah." I texted Sakura back.

You wanted water, right? Of course that's okay. Would one bottle be enough? said her message.

That's plenty, thank you. Can I come get it now?

Sure. I'll wait for you, Sakura replied.

It was difficult to hold a conversation with Sakura in person, but when we texted, it went smoothly.

"Good news, Horikita. Apparently, Sakura has water. She just gave me the okay to borrow some, so I'll be going now."

"Thank you. However, please don't tell Sakura-san about me," Horikita replied.

"Well, since you won't be stuck like this anymore, how about we take a commemorative photo?" I joked.

Horikita seemed to be about to start swinging the water bottle at me, so I ran into the hall.

"What a terrifying woman. Considering her physical prowess, if she hit me on the head with that bottle, I'd probably die," I muttered.

If a high school girl with her arm stuck in a water bottle killed me, my name would live on in infamy.

4.6

“There—it’s off,” I said.

After a long, arduous struggle, we’d finally succeeded in freeing Horikita from the water bottle.

“Honestly, this day was a complete disaster,” she muttered. If my hand had been trapped in a water bottle, I would’ve felt the same. “Ayanokouji-kun. Please don’t speak a word of this to anyone.”

“Before you go issuing warnings, isn’t there something else you’d like to say first?”

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t sincere, but at least it sounded like an approximation of gratitude.

“I have to say, getting trapped in a water bottle? That’s just so unlike you, Horikita.”

“Shut up,” she snapped.

I decided that I’d outstayed my welcome, so I headed back to my own room.

Really, though, was it even possible for someone’s arm to get stuck in a water bottle? I took a bottle out of a box, rinsed it, and then inserted my hand as a test. It was an exact fit. The bottle felt surprisingly snug.

“Rocket punch! Eh, just kidding.”

I gave in to silliness for a moment. When I tried to get my hand out of the water bottle, though…

“I-I think I’m trapped!”

Chapter 5:
A Day of Girl Troubles and Disaster: A Devil Smiles Like an Angel

"You're gonna do what I say today, Ayanokouji!"

Woken by the doorbell, I sighed when I saw my visitor. "What're you yammering about this early? You sure are energetic, Yamauchi."

"What, were you sleeping or something? Dude, you're acting pretty chill, even though summer vacation is over in a couple days," Yamauchi said. "Anyway, I decided that today's gonna be special. Let me in."

I was being chill precisely because we only had a couple days of vacation left. Still sleepy, I didn't exactly follow Yamauchi's train of thought, but I let him in anyway. I prepared a cup of barley tea for him and set it down.

"So, am I involved in this special day of yours?" I asked.

"I'm not gonna let you weasel out of this, Ayanokouji.

Remember when I wanted to know Sakura's phone number?" he pressed.

Yamauchi's determination was obvious. His eyes were slightly bloodshot.

"I see."

I couldn't just turn him down. The whole situation was kind of my fault, after all. Some time ago, I'd gotten Yamauchi to make a fool of himself by promising him Sakura's number. That had damaged his perceived market value, especially in Horikita's eyes. I definitely owed him one. Still, since I'd made that bargain without Sakura's consent, I wasn't about to give Yamauchi her number.

I did need to repay my debt to him, though.

"Well, if you've come to ask about Sakura's number, I think

that might be kinda difficult."

"Oh no. That's not it. I've given up on that." Yamauchi produced a letter. "I've written down all my feelings for Sakura on this paper!"

"Written down… Wait, this is a love letter?"

"Right! I've written about just how much I love Sakura! Here, read it!"

Yamauchi showed me the note in the unsealed envelope.

Dearest Sakura Airi-sama, you've been on my mind for a long time now. Please go out with me.

"It's really…simple. And overly formal at the beginning," I said.

Yamauchi looked pained. "Even if I write something long, that doesn't mean it'll be good, right?"

That was probably true. Still, this was too little to go on. I could honestly picture the letter's recipient—especially Sakura—being uncomfortable.

"Wait. Why is it printed, instead of handwritten?" I asked.

"I'm not really proud of this, but my handwriting sucks. I printed the letter to make it easier to read. I was kind of worried she might not be able to understand it, you know?"

Yamauchi scratched his nose with his index finger, looking a bit proud. I didn't think that pride was merited.

"Besides, even resumes are printed nowadays, right?" he added.

"If you really want to convey your feelings, handwritten is better. Also, why'd you use such a scary-looking font?"

It was the kind of font you'd choose for something like "A strange demon appears!" It looked as though it was made for casting curses.

"It's got impact, right? The letter's got this whole 'I've been thinking of you for a long time' vibe."

"For the sake of argument, I'll let that go. The problem's the last part," I replied, pointing out what he'd written to add to his

appeal.

If you go out with me, I'll give you all my points every month as tribute!

"That's no good."

"Whaddya mean? Don't they say that cute girls like men who can support them? If going out with Sakura means I gotta hand over all my points, I'll do it. That's how I'll communicate my passion."

I couldn't deny that girls loved financial stability, but it kind of seemed as though Yamauchi was offering to pay Sakura to date him.

"It's fine, dude. Even if she was only after the money, it'd be all right. I want to date her. Is that bad?"

When I affirmed that it was indeed bad, Yamauchi began to grasp just what I was getting at. "Are you seriously planning on confessing your love to her?" I asked.

"Yeah. Starting with the second semester, I'm aiming for my dream school life! I've already asked Kikyou-chan to help. I got her to call Sakura."

This was all perfectly normal to Yamauchi, and I found I couldn't bring myself to rebuke him. I should probably have stopped him, for Sakura's sake, but at least his methods were direct and honest. I considered offering him a helping hand.

"So, what should I do? Proofread the letter?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, but I have one more really important role for you. I want you to deliver the letter to Sakura."

"What?" I thought I'd misheard him.

"I want you to deliver the letter. Look, I've been feeling super nervous all morning, all right? The last time I felt this nervous, I won the final match at the Ryougoku Kokugikan Sumo Hall. That's why I don't have the confidence to give the letter to Sakura myself," he explained.

Wait, what final game had he participated in at Kokugikan? I wanted to interrogate that probable lie further. It was honestly a weak statement, and uncharacteristic for Yamauchi.

"If you say the letter's the problem, then I'll rewrite it.

Please!" Yamauchi clapped his hands, bowed his head, and begged me to help. "Any past problems between us will all be water under the bridge! If you're ever in trouble, Ayanokouji, I'll help you!"

"If you insist, I guess I'll help," I replied.

"Really?!"

"But what matters is how Sakura feels. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I'm not an idiot. I know my chances aren't that high."

At least Yamauchi understood that his chances of success were low. In fact, Sakura actively shied away from men, which made his chances *despairingly* low. Even so, he was determined to try.

"I understand. I'll deliver your letter. Okay?"

"Ayanokouji! You're a lifesaver!"

Yamauchi grabbed my hand and lowered his head in reverence, as if worshipping a god.

First, I'd need to review the letter carefully. Considering that it was for Sakura, it needed to be gentler if it was going to work. Honestly, this was still rather premature. Confessing his love, when he and Sakura hadn't even exchanged contact information, was just risky. If Yamauchi wanted to increase his chances of success, he needed to actually talk to her.

Then again, maybe Yamauchi had a point. Romance happened spontaneously. People often went from zero to sixty very quickly.

Like Yamauchi, I had zero romantic experience, but I thought that I should at least do something to help.

"Ah, that reminds me. I want to add one more thing to the letter. I want to hear Sakura's response to my confession behind the school building," added Yamauchi.

"Behind the school building? After Gym Number Two?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's like, there's this rumor, y'know? If you confess your feelings there, it's sure to go well."

"So, that's the stage you've chosen for this whole production?"

"I mean, it's not just a rumor. They say, if a student confesses their love, it's gotta be behind the school. That's like the golden rule."

I couldn’t see any connection between telling someone how you felt and the back of the school building. However, I understood his thinking.

5.1

It took just under half an hour for me to contact Sakura. How would she react to Kushida's invitation, I wondered? She probably wouldn't take this with equanimity. I, on the other hand, was on standby at the agreed-upon spot, waiting for Sakura to arrive.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I answered it.

"Hello?"

"H-how's it going? Can you see Sakura yet?" Yamauchi asked.

"Nope. I mean, she's probably not going to show up until about ten minutes beforehand, right?"

"I-I see. Damn, I'm so nervous!"

Yamauchi waved from where he stood, some distance away. Even though he didn't want to be seen, he'd probably gotten curious, and come closer to have a look.

"Hey, Yamauchi. Should I really hand the letter over for you? I think it would be better if you gave Sakura this yourself."

"Th-that's impossible, dude. Whenever I'm really nervous, my hands start to shake. I've carried that trauma ever since I was a little kid."

Most people probably shook under extreme stress, though.

"I understand that you don't want to mess up, but think about it. Does an indirect love letter really have any value?"

"You know when a cute girl asks you to meet her after school, but when you go, a completely different girl from the one you expected shows up, and it's this plain Jane confessing to you instead? This plan is sort of the reverse. I asked Kushida not to tell Sakura that I'm the one asking her to meet. In other words, when Sakura realizes you're waiting for her, she'll be disappointed. But once she learns that it's really me confessing, my chances will be a lot better when she compares us, you know? So, when you hand over the letter, don't mention me at all. It's better for Sakura to

think you're the one confessing," he said.

Yamauchi didn't seem to care that he was completely trash-talking me. I had no room to criticize his goals, but he really needed to consider Sakura's feelings.

"Look, I just think getting a confession of love from someone you can't see is scary," I replied.

"Th-that's—"

I wanted to get him to change his mind. With a confession of love, you had one shot. I figured that even Yamauchi shouldn't do it in a way that might leave him with regrets.

"There's still time. I think you should reconsider. That's why you wrote this letter, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose, but… Ugh, should I confess to Sakura in person?" Finally, the proper conclusion seemed to form inside Yamauchi's head.

"Ayanokouji-kun?" Just then, I heard the faint sound of footsteps, and a voice called out to me.

"It's Sakura! I'm leaving the rest to you!" whispered Yamauchi. Panicked, he hung up.

Well, there probably wasn't much else I could do at this point. All that was left was to hand over Yamauchi's letter.

"This is a coincidence, right?" Sakura asked.

"Kushida called you here, right?"

"Y-yes. She said that she needed to talk to me about something. She said it was important," Sakura replied meekly. She looked around, but of course, she could see no one but me.

"To tell you the truth, I asked Kushida for a favor. She called you out here for me," I said. Strictly speaking, that wasn't true, but I couldn't help it if Sakura got confused.

"You, Ayanokouji-kun? I-I see. That's a relief. I don't normally talk to Kushida-san, so I was worried I did something to make her angry." Sakura put her hand to her chest and sighed in relief. She no longer seemed anxious. I decided to be direct.

"Even so, you're pretty early. It's still about half an hour before we were supposed to meet," I said.

“I was feeling anxious, so I came early.” Sakura still looked flustered. “But it was you, after all, Ayanokouji-kun. I’m really relieved.”

When she patted her chest, her expression became calmer.

“But why get Kushida’s help, Ayanokouji-kun? If you want something, you could just ask me directly.”

“Oh, um. About that. It’s a complicated situation.”

“A complicated situation?”

How would I explain? I knew quite enough about the biological differences between men and women through my studies, but I had no practical knowledge whatsoever of romance. Also, the issue wasn’t just our different genders. I had to factor in Sakura’s personality and feelings, too. Even in our modern, effective, intelligent society, this little dance remained a complicated mystery.

Time passed while I considered what to do. The longer I stayed silent, the more guarded Sakura would become.

“The truth is, I had Kushida call you here because I wanted to give you this.” I offered her Yamauchi’s letter.

“What’s this?”

“If you read the contents, you’ll understand well enough,” I said.

“O-okay.”

Feeling something akin to guilt, I averted my eyes. Sakura looked back and forth between me and the letter, as if trying to grasp the situation.

“A l-letter…behind the school… A boy…” she whispered. Whoa! She thought that *I* was confessing my love. This was bad.

“Someone who wants to stay anonymous asked me to give you this. He said that, if you read it, you’d understand. He has bad handwriting, but he really poured his heart and soul into this letter,” I said.

“Ah, ahhh. Th-this is… Oh my. Oh my. Ahhh!”

Sakura’s composure was gone. She stared into space as if looking into the future. I was apprehensive about her reaction if she opened the envelope and read the letter, so I decided it was best

that I skedaddled.

“Okay, well. I’ve handed the letter over. All that’s left is for you to decide how to respond. You can text or call me if answering directly is too hard,” I said.

“I, I, I, I, I, I, I—!” she stammered. “I-I just, well…I can’t! I mean, th-this is a l-love—”

“Yeah, a love letter.”

“Eek!”

“Whoa!” I rushed to support Sakura as she came dangerously close to toppling over. “Are you all right?”

I could tell she was too warm just by touching her back. This must’ve been really unexpected for her. She was probably trying to figure out who sent the letter.

“Um, um, um!”

Sakura’s eyes shot open. She stiffened and stood up straight. Once I was sure she was steady, I let go of her.

“What about…Horikita-san?! Do you think she’ll be angry?!”

“Huh? Horikita?”

Why should Horikita get angry? If she saw me deliver a letter in Yamauchi’s place, she’d probably just sigh in exasperation, and say something like, “Oh my, how difficult it must be for you not to get involved in something idiotic.” It certainly wouldn’t make her angry.

Did Sakura still think I was confessing? I *had* made sure to say that I was only the messenger.

“Umm.. Ahh…” Sakura’s face continued to redden. She looked as though she might pass out. I couldn’t imagine that the letter was the only thing making her react that way.

If she *did* still think I wrote the letter, I understood why she’d brought up Horikita.

“Sakura. Just to repeat myself, this letter is from another guy. Do you understand?”

Sakura’s shoulders trembled.

“Eh? I-It’s not from you, Ayanokouji-kun?” she stammered.

“I already told you that I’m the messenger, didn’t I?”

“I-I see. Of course that’s what… B-b-b-but, what do I do with this letter?!” she cried.

“Just read it and answer.”

I tried to walk away, but Sakura grabbed my sleeve. “But I can’t…I can’t do it! I can’t…”

“Has no one ever confessed their feelings to you before?”

“Never!” Sakura replied instantly.

Huh. I would’ve thought she’d been confessed to countless times, given how cute she was.

“This letter… Will you read it with me? Together?”

Together? Well, Yamauchi had actually written the thing with my help. However, if Sakura didn’t have the courage to read the letter alone, I couldn’t really help her. Yamauchi probably wouldn’t like that.

“Can you try to read it by yourself? As the messenger, it’s my job to ask you that. I hope you understand.”

“Okay…”

Sakura didn’t seem even slightly happy about that.

“Maybe the letter’s from someone you like,” I said.

“That’s not possible now,” she said sadly.

“Huh?”

“Ah, no! That’s just, well, that’s because I don’t like anyone! I mean, I-I’ll try reading it!” she stammered.

Sakura hung her head, looking a little depressed as she turned and headed back to the dorms. She would probably read Yamauchi’s letter in her room.

Yamauchi rushed over as soon as Sakura had safely left the area. “H-how’d it go?! How’d she react?! Did she look happy?!” he asked nervously. I understood his sense of urgency, but really, it indicated that he should have been the one to deliver the letter.

“She hasn’t read it yet. We’ll just wait for judgment,” I replied.

“D-don’t use a scary word like ‘judgment’! I believe it’ll absolutely be fine!” Yamauchi responded, frantic.

“Out of curiosity, what’s your basis for that belief?”

“How she acts when she talks to me, I guess,” he answered sheepishly.

“How she acts?”

“You know, how she looks away, all embarrassed. She can’t look me in the face because she’s really aware of me, don’t you think?”

Actually, I thought that was probably because Sakura lacked people skills.

“That’s not all. Whenever she talks to me, she always kind of sighs heavily afterward. Isn’t that a sigh of love? You know, when you think about the person you like, and then you sigh, like ‘Ahh!’ It’s like a sign, dude,” said Yamauchi.

Sakura probably sighed from exhaustion after dealing with someone as high-energy as Yamauchi. People were naturally oblivious to reality and logic when it came to the girls they liked, though.

5.2

It was the middle of the night, and I was settling in for bed when my phone vibrated.

Are you awake? It was a rather short message from Sakura.

I looked at my phone for some time without touching it, but saw no indication that there'd be more messages. Sakura probably thought I was sleeping. I opened the chat window, marking the message as read. Soon, I received another message.

Did I wake you? it said.

Sorry, I was doing some laundry. It's okay. A small lie.

She must have felt relieved, because the next message was slightly longer.

I have to meet with Yamauchi-kun at five tomorrow, but…can I meet you before that? I could've refused. However, Sakura didn't have anyone else.

Where are you meeting him?

The same place as yesterday: behind the school building.

I already knew that, but I'd wanted to confirm. I promised Sakura that I would meet her at the same location behind the school. Then it was time to sleep.

I turned my phone's screen off and set it down. It vibrated again, though.

Um. I'm sorry for bothering you over and over. Is it okay if I call you?

Her anxiety radiated from her message. It would probably be better if I didn't leave her hanging. When I called her, Sakura answered quietly.

"You can't sleep?" I asked.

"No. When I think about tomorrow, I get so nervous. Ahh…" Sakura sighed over the phone.

She sounded depressed. She was probably considering how she'd answer the confession.

"I-I don't know anything about Yamauchi-kun. That's a bit scary," she said.

"I see."

"I just realized that liking someone, or hating someone, actually comes with a ton of responsibility."

I supposed that to Sakura, who had distanced herself from those around her until now, that must have come as a shock. In this case, though, my ability to help was rather limited. Sakura would have to make this decision. Yamauchi would live with the consequences. Even someone like me, a complete novice when it came to romance, understood that.

I couldn't advise Sakura on whether to reject or accept Yamauchi. I could only listen quietly to what she had to say.

"Yamauchi-kun hasn't done anything wrong, but this… I think I just don't want this. Still, I do feel sorry for him, since he likes someone like me…"

Love was a rather complicated matter.

"I've been thinking about it for a while now, but I just don't know what to do." That was understandable. Even over the phone, Sakura's confusion was palpable. "Why me? That's what I'm wondering. Why do I have to suffer like this?"

As I'd expected, she sounded troubled about the situation, rather than happy.

"Ayanokouji-kun, this… Well, this might be something you don't need to hear, but…"

"Ask me anything. If I can answer, I will."

"Well… I'm sorry to bother you, but are you perhaps dating anyone at the…present time?" For some reason, Sakura was being rather formal.

"No, definitely not. I've never dated anyone, and I'm not dating anyone currently."

"R-really?!"

"You sound happy about that, which makes me feel like you're

being sarcastic."

"O-oh, no, that's not… I didn't mean to make fun of you! I was happy because you're like me, that's all."

"I was just teasing," I replied.

"Oh, you!" It was only a little joke, but it seemed to lighten Sakura's spirits. "Well, has anyone ever confessed their feelings to you? Or have you ever confessed your feelings to someone else?"

She was really grilling me. Well, I had nothing to hide.

"I have zero experience, same as you."

"Okay, I see!"

Sakura sounded happy again. We chatted for a while about this and that. After some time passed, she seemed to get drowsy, and we ended the call. I hoped she could sleep soundly. Speaking of which, I thought it was about time for me to get to sleep as well.

5.3

Our meeting time was four in the afternoon. I showed up ten minutes early to find Sakura already waiting, with a pained, complicated look on her face. She was probably juggling several preoccupations, since her expression kept shifting. She looked crestfallen, then nervous, then worried. I wondered what she was thinking about.

"Did I keep you waiting?" I asked.

"Oh!"

Sakura approached me hesitantly. I hoped I could ease her burdens a bit.

"Thank you for coming here, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Nah, it's nothing. So, what's the matter?"

"Well, it's about the letter you gave me yesterday.".

"Did something happen?"

Maybe Sakura was still hesitant to talk about it. She didn't seem able to get the words out. I was about to tell her not to hold back when I saw several people walking our way down the path. They must've been doing club activities, since they wore jerseys.

"Sorry. How about we walk around a little?" I asked Sakura.

"Huh? Oh, okay," she replied.

It wasn't a good idea to let someone see us right then. We headed toward the tree-lined spot at the back of the school building. This was a hidden spot where most people didn't come, but it looked well-kept.

It'd be a huge pain in the butt if Yamauchi happened to come early and spot us there, so I knew we should wrap things up quickly. Sakura tilted her head, extended her right arm, and looked toward the sky.

"What's the—"

A single water droplet landed on my cheek. If it didn't come

from a sprinkler, then—

"It's raining," said Sakura.

The skies had been clear just a moment ago, but now, it was pouring rain. It would probably pass soon, but the downpour was intense. Our clothes were soaking wet in minutes.

"Let's head back to the path!" I shouted.

Sakura nodded. I led her back the way we came, and we took shelter behind the school building. We were only in the rain for a bit, but it came down so hard that it completely soaked Sakura's clothes. Even her hair was drenched.

"Man, talk about unlucky. Are you okay, Sakura?"

"I-I'm fine. What about you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I'm all right."

I let out a little sigh while I watched the rain, which grew even more intense. What bad timing.

"Here, you can use this." Sakura meekly handed me a handkerchief. It was the same one I'd borrowed back on the island.

"I'm fine. Use that yourself. You'll catch a cold," I replied.

I couldn't dry myself off when a girl was absolutely soaked. Even so, Sakura stood on her tiptoes and wiped the excess water from my hair. Her scent, carried by the rain, tickled my nose.

"I'm surprisingly tough, you know," she said. She mopped the water from my face, then my cheeks and neck.

"……"

I looked over at Sakura, who stood beside me in silence. I felt as though I could understand what Yamauchi was after now. Sudden rain. The two of us panicked, sheltering under the roof. It would have been even more magical if Sakura and I had been in our school uniforms, rather than casual clothes, since it was the middle of summer vacation.

There'd be nothing to hide from each other. We'd talk until we ran out of things to say. Then, our eyes would meet. We'd each hear the other person breathing deeply. It was the kind of scenario boys dreamed about. For some reason, I could picture it very clearly. Maybe what Yamauchi desired was something like this.

“I wonder if it’ll pass?”

“I looked up the weather on my phone just now. Sounds like this is just a passing shower. It should stop soon,” I told her.

“I see.”

“Sorry. I let you get soaked, even though you had something important to do after this,” I said.

“Oh no, it’s fine. It’s really not important,” Sakura replied.

In other words, that meant…

“I…I wonder what I should do…” she continued.

“Just answer based on how you feel. You can accept Yamauchi, or reject him, or you can start by being friends,” I said. What she wanted was up to her, not me. “Of course, you can always hold off on answering, too. And if it’s too embarrassing, I can tell Yamauchi for you.”

Yamauchi wouldn’t want that, but if Sakura asked, I’d do it.

“No, I’ll do it myself. I think I probably have to,” she replied.

“I see. I suppose you should, for Yamauchi’s sake.”

“Yes. I know. I’m going to turn him down.”

“I see.” I’d already guessed as much. It was important that she tell him herself, though.

“It’s just… Well, I don’t think I’m qualified to reject someone. I think it might be presumptuous of me, but…but…”

Sakura appeared overwhelmed by guilt, for some reason.

“You have nothing to apologize for. When you get down to it, this crush is one-sided. There’s nothing strange about turning someone down if you don’t feel the same way. In this situation, there’s no such thing as being unqualified.” I spoke with some force, not wanting her to misunderstand.

The rain was still coming down hard. I thought it should stop soon, but there was no telling when Yamauchi would show up.

“It’s best if I head back now, I think,” I said.

“N-no! If you’re not here, Ayanokouji-kun, I won’t be able to say anything. So, please…”

Sakura grabbed my sleeve tight.

“Please don’t leave me alone,” she pleaded.

“If that’s your preference,” I replied. Sakura had helped me many times before, after all. I decided I should return the favor.

About fifteen minutes later, Yamauchi arrived, his expression much stiffer than I had ever seen.

“Wh-why are *you* here, Ayanokouji?” he asked.

“Sorry. Sakura said she didn’t have the courage to talk to you alone, so she asked me to stay. Don’t mind me.”

I’m sure Yamauchi didn’t feel comfortable having me there. However, he had no choice except to deal with it. He looked suspicious, but then, focused his attention on Sakura.

“S-sorry to have kept you waiting. So, did you read my letter?”

“Yes. Um. Please, let me ask you one thing.”

“Sure, anything.”

Sakura grabbed her skirt and spoke as though she was squeezing her voice out of her throat. “Wh-why do you like…me? Plenty of people are cuter than me.”

“I like *you* , Sakura!” Yamauchi shouted. Sakura flinched in response. “S-sorry. I didn’t mean to shout. S-so, what’s your answer?”

Listening in, I could see a number of potential ways to handle the situation. But Yamauchi was so incredibly nervous, his heart about to leap out of his chest, that he probably couldn’t think of any of them, let alone pick the best option.

“I…I’m sorry!” sputtered Sakura, bowing deeply, her eyes slightly red. An awkward answer for an awkward confession. Yamauchi’s last spark of hope crumbled to dust and blew away.

“I, it’s just, w-well, I can’t, um, return your feelings,” Sakura added. It must have taken her a lot of courage to unleash those words.

“I see,” Yamauchi replied.

It sounded as though he was desperately trying to digest what

had happened. His voice shook, just like Sakura's. I couldn't bring myself to laugh at him.

"Thank you, Sakura. For coming all the way here, um, to tell me in person," he added.

"G-goodbye!" Sakura, no longer able to bear the situation, bowed and ran away.

"Ah," sighed Yamauchi.

He extended his arm weakly, as if to try to catch Sakura as she left. I couldn't do anything but stand there quietly, watching the first romance I ever saw in person break down. Yamauchi endured the frustration in silence for a few minutes, but eventually, he lifted his head and looked at me. Maybe he was going to take his anger out on me instead?

"M-man, talk about embarrassing. Getting rejected by a girl in front of your buddy. I feel like my face is on fire." Yamauchi sighed, not blaming me at all. I still saw the shock of rejection on his face, but that wasn't all. "Whew. It's like… How do I even put it? I almost feel relieved, you know?"

Yamauchi sounded nearly cheerful now.

"Like, I was a real idiot. I was just causing Sakura trouble. She tried so carefully not to hurt me, a guy she didn't like. I feel incredibly guilty. I mean, I'm free to like her and all, but I've learned that conveying your feelings to someone comes with responsibility."

I realized that Yamauchi's clothes were wet. Clearly, he'd been standing outside well before he and Sakura had arranged to meet. Perhaps he'd been contemplating the confession nervously.

"You're not as upset as I thought you'd be," I said.

"Well, it's a shock, but it's not all that bad. Sakura's cute, and I wanted her to be my girlfriend. But I was just looking at her face and her body, you know? That's a cheap thing to do. I think, like, I didn't really love her. If I really liked her, I would've felt worse when she rejected me."

I didn't dare say anything. I just listened quietly.

"That's why I'm moving on. I'll find a girl that I really like." Apparently, Yamauchi had matured a bit after Sakura rejected him.

In record time, too. “I’m grateful to you, Ayanokouji. Sorry for involving you in something so weird.”

“It’s okay, because…we’re friends,” I replied.

“Here, I’ll lend you this. You said you wanted to borrow a phone, right?”

“Didn’t you say it depended on your confession being successful?”

“I’m making an exception. But you better return it right away,” he added.

With that, Yamauchi ran off after Sakura. That was when I noticed rays of sunlight shining down through the spaces between the rainclouds.

Chapter 6:
A Gathering
Between Classes

"It's so hot today."

How many times had I said that this summer? Still, it really was hot, no way around it. Even if saying so out loud made you feel hotter, you couldn't stop yourself. Just thinking the words didn't help. Cicadas were probably the only creatures who preferred this sweltering heat.

Heat aside, I'd gotten caught up in yet another unusual incident. If the other guys knew about this situation, they probably wouldn't be happy with me at all. It was a very nasty problem.

Well, let's start from the beginning.

A tree-lined path a short distance from the dormitory led to the school. If you went off that path, you'd find a rest area. That's where I was. It was a popular spot to sit down and chat. There were several benches and vending machines, the view was great, and many students frequented it in the early spring.

The heat made this a rare off-season period for the rest area. It was completely deserted, which turned it into a perfect spot for a clandestine meeting.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting."

As I sat on the bench, Karuizawa Kei walked toward me. She shaded her eyes from the blinding sunlight with a hand and looked at the sky.

"So hot," she muttered. Apparently, we were of one mind on the subject.

Karuizawa's long ponytail bobbed as she sat down next to me. She wore an unusually casual outfit: jeans and a simple shirt. Even so, the outfit looked coordinated and stylish. I supposed girls had to prioritize fashion no matter how hot it was, which had to be tough.

"I know you're busy right now. Sorry for dragging you out like

this," I said.

"Are you being sarcastic? I played around too much this summer. I don't have any points to spend, so I've just been hanging out in my room."

"Do you have plans tomorrow?" I asked.

"I can't really do anything without money. I'll probably be sleeping." It sounded like Karuizawa really was indulging herself this summer.

"You should get a lot of points next month, though. I mean, after the last test."

During the exam on the cruise ship, Karuizawa—who'd been the VIP—had worked together with me. We managed to keep her identity secret until the test ended. Because of that, Karuizawa would receive 500,000 points as a reward come September.

"Yeah, I guess. I've picked out the clothes and accessories and stuff I want to get. But is it really okay to use all the points like that? Isn't it better to save some?"

"You can hold yourself back?" I asked, teasing her a little. She puffed out her cheeks and glared at me.

"Well, it's not that simple. When I have points, they seem to last less than a week," she muttered.

Karuizawa mimed counting all the things she wanted on her fingers. She was out of fingers in no time. Just how many things did she plan to get anyway?

"But, like, even *I* know how important private points are. The school system's really weird, right? You get, like, this ridiculously huge amount of points during special exams and stuff. Everyone else is wondering about that, too," she observed.

The regular student body was finally starting to suspect that something was up, apparently. I supposed that was natural. If you suddenly received a large sum of money, you'd question the school's motives. You'd consider the possibility that private points weren't just meant for use on one's private desires.

"That's true. Some students might get as many as 1,000,000 or 2,000,000 points," I said.

“Yeah. Is it really okay to give high schoolers that much money? It’s definitely not normal.”

The points were sort of necessary for us to “survive” at school, which was probably why Karuizawa was unsure how best to use them. For example, if you made a blunder that could result in your expulsion, you could make the problem go away with enough private points. Having a few million points on hand as insurance probably was a good idea.

“There’s no reason to think about it too much. Looking too far ahead can drive you insane. If you retain ten to twenty percent of your monthly points, that should be enough,” I said.

You had to maintain a balance between your wants and needs. For Karuizawa, who’d always been a shopaholic, curbing her desires was hard. Besides, if a former spendthrift suddenly became miserly, students in our class might get suspicious. I didn’t want anyone to connect her change in circumstances to me.

“I want to ask you for a favor,” I said.

“What, you’re not even going to apologize first for calling me out here on such a hot day?”

“Want this?” I handed her a bottle of tea I hadn’t drunk from yet. She hesitated, then reluctantly accepted it.

“It’s a little warm,” she muttered.

“That’s the weather’s fault. Nothing I can do.”

Some places nearby had recorded temperatures of forty degrees Celsius or higher. Just thinking the number made me feel hot.

Karuizawa struggled to uncap her drink. “Hmph. Guess I got a loser.”

“A loser? You don’t usually get prizes in tea bottle caps.”

“That’s not funny, you know. I’m talking about how hard this is to open,” she grumbled.

Well, it had been a poor joke. I reached over, took the drink, twisted the cap, and returned it.

“Thanks.”

After what’d happened on the boat, the distance between

Karuizawa and I had diminished. Before summer vacation, it would've been impossible for us to have this kind of conversation. She probably still didn't trust me, but she showed no sign of that.

Karuizawa really understood self-control. To protect herself and her status, she could adapt to any environment.

"Tomorrow's the last day of summer vacation. One of my friends invited me to make some fun summer memories."

"What do you mean, summer memories? We don't have fireworks or a festival or anything like that here, do we?" asked Karuizawa.

"The school has a big pool, right? It's normally reserved for the swim club. Did you know that the restriction was lifted for today?"

That pool was even bigger than the one we used during swim class. For the last three days of summer vacation, it was open for communal use. When a huge crowd of students flooded the pool on the first day, the school put additional restrictions in place. Students could only use the pool once during those last three days. Apparently, the second day was really busy, too.

"Ah. Now that you mention it, though, I'm not that interested in swimming," muttered Karuizawa.

She always skipped swim class by claiming she didn't feel well. Even though it was difficult to cut class due to the point system, the school couldn't really question a student's poor physical condition, especially not woman-specific problems. There were girls other than Karuizawa who refused to participate, probably for a variety of reasons. They might feel ill, not want other people to know they couldn't swim well, or even hate swimming in the first place. Maybe they didn't want to show that much skin around boys. And so on.

However, Karuizawa's circumstances were different. A while ago, Karuizawa had been viciously bullied by her classmates. As a result, she had a terrible scar on her side. If someone saw it, it would definitely cause a stir.

"Do you like swimming?" I asked her.

"Hmm. Well, I don't hate it, I guess. I haven't gone swimming

for years now, so I've probably forgotten how." Karuizawa drank her tea and stared ahead as she replied. I could tell that wasn't how she really felt. "So, what, the guys want to make memories at the pool? You're obviously just planning to be perverts."

I couldn't deny that, actually. That was probably exactly their reasoning.

"So, what does this have to do with me?" asked Karuizawa.

"Before I answer that, let me ask you one thing. Does the school really not know that you were bullied before?"

"Huh?"

Karuizawa looked puzzled for a moment, then turned to glare at me. Her polite façade was gone. I returned her stare.

"You know I don't want to talk about that, right?" she growled.

"I'm not reopening old wounds for no reason. I'm asking because it's relevant," I replied.

"But…" This had to be a serious topic for Karuizawa. She seemed to come to a decision. "All right. I'm sure you must have a reason for this."

She tried to swallow her anxieties.

"I definitely don't think they know the truth about me being bullied. They might know about my leave of absence from school, or how many days off I took during junior high, but they probably think those were due to me being sick or skipping class, you know? Or they might just think I'm stupid. That's probably why they put me in Class D."

Karuizawa sounded self-deprecating, but she was likely right. The school must've had a poor impression of her bad attendance record and low grades.

"Even if the school investigates the matter, they probably won't find any evidence of the bullying," she added.

"You realize that the world is magnificently rotten, don't you?"

"Yeah," Karuizawa muttered. "I suffered for many years. I asked my teachers and classmates for help, but that only made it

worse. There was no escape."

Human nature included a strong tendency to fall into vicious cycles. Bullying was deeply rooted in the human psyche. There was no simple solution to it. If a victim pushed back, that might only result in them being attacked more fiercely the next time.

"No matter how often they beat me up, the school ignored the bullying, and wouldn't do anything. They gave the bullies light warnings, at most. Of course, it got worse, you know?"

Even if a school acknowledged bullying, they usually wanted to deal with it in secret, so as not to risk damaging their reputation. There were schools that would stubbornly refuse to admit the truth even after a bullied student killed themselves, leaving behind a note.

Worse, death might bring no salvation. The bullied student might be insulted even after they died. People could mock them, or share their story on social media for entertainment. What a terrifying era it was, when you could be bullied even after death.

"The school, the people who bullied me, even myself… No one admitted the truth. My friends spouted the same lies. That was the only way they could answer, no matter how unjust it was."

Karuizawa spoke almost as if she were talking about someone else. In truth, this school had probably investigated her case thoroughly. Had they concluded that she was an airhead, didn't take school seriously, and cut class? If everyone believed that to be true, then the real truth wouldn't matter. It would be buried forever under all the lies.

"But I'm grateful to the people who bullied me, and the school that covered it up," Karuizawa added. "No one here knows about my past. That's why I was able to become a new me. I couldn't have done that if everyone here had heard of the bullying."

She'd turned her situation around by obtaining the exceptionally popular Hirata's support and protection.

"Karuizawa, I think you deserve praise, but I should tell you something first. From now on, you're forbidden to do anything that supports bullying others."

"Huh? Are you saying that I'm bullying someone?"

“It’s one thing to be headstrong, but you’ve been going after Sakura. She clearly isn’t the kind of girl who’d bully you. Even if you’re doing it to prevent yourself from becoming a victim, stop.” Despite Karuizawa’s past suffering, there were things I couldn’t tolerate.

“Sakura-san, huh? You want me to help her because she’s so attached to you?”

“Do I need a reason? You should understand how it feels to be bullied.”

“My social status is my lifeline. It’s not something I’m ready to just discard. I *do* feel sorry for Sakura-san, but the weak exist as prey for the strong. Especially those pretending to be strong, like me.” She was resolute.

“I’m asking for Sakura’s sake. She’s helped me quite a few times, after all.”

“Hmph. You openly admit it,” Karuizawa huffed. There was no dissatisfaction or discontent in her eyes. Only wariness. “You’re not convincing, but…fine. I’ll be careful from now on. Okay?”

“Being reasonable is helpful. Besides, Hirata’s already established your current popularity. You shouldn’t be in any danger.”

“I suppose you’re right. Maybe I’ve been overdoing it a little,” Karuizawa replied softly. “But, if my position *does* appear to be in danger, then—”

“When that happens, I’ll back you. If necessary, I’ll bring in Hirata and even Chabashira-sensei to eliminate your enemies. That’s a promise.”

“Hmm. Okay then. Deal.”

Karuizawa never struck me as the sort of person who’d resort to violence or intimidation in the first place. She could pretend all she liked, but she was just playing that part to protect herself. People who’d been bullied for years usually couldn’t socialize easily, but she overcame that trauma.

“I wonder why?” she muttered.

“What?”

“It’s just that I don’t really like bringing up my past. I thought I’d never tell anyone about it. But I ended up telling you, and it felt so surprisingly fine that it’s kind of odd, you know?”

Apparently even Karuizawa didn’t know why she’d told me about the bullying. I wasn’t sure of the reason, either.

“Can I ask you something? Is the way you’re acting now the real you?” She sounded somewhat guarded. Karuizawa was the only person in our class who’d seen both my sides. I crossed my arms and racked my brain for how to respond.

“I’m always like this, I guess.”

“You’re completely different, though.”

Well, strictly speaking, this wasn’t really me. However, it wasn’t the same as faking a personality.

“I want to ask you something. What would you say is the specific difference between me right now, and the usual me?”

“Usually, you’re this gloomy guy. You don’t talk at all. But now, you’re assertive. You’re being direct. Those traits are polar opposites. The way you talk is different, too. What’s your deal, anyway?”

“What do you mean? Don’t people simply act differently depending on who they’re with? Don’t you do the same thing?”

That was probably the best possible rebuttal, although it didn’t fit exactly. The truth was that it felt like I’d just been born as an individual. When I enrolled in this school, I wasn’t fully formed. I was like liquid, or moldable clay. Developing into a full person took time, and I had yet to completely understand how to interact, or the correct way to express myself.

“Anyway, I plan on just being my usual self,” I said.

“You don’t sound like anything like your usual self,” Karuizawa replied. She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand. You can keep an eye on me from now on, and determine what kind of person I am.”

“I kinda get the feeling you’re dodging the question. Well, all right. Let’s go back to talking about the school. What’s up with it?”

“Tomorrow, four of us guys—me, Ike, Yamauchi, and Sudou—

are planning to go out, along with Horikita, Sakura, and Kushida."

"Talk about a bizarre combination. I can't imagine Horikita-san and Sakura-san hanging out with those guys. I guess they're both friendly with *you* , but the other three are just going to end up ogling them, right? They have my sincerest condolences."

"I want you to join us," I said.

"Huh?! Are you serious?!" Karuizawa shouted.

She had no connection to the group. If anything, there was tension between her and them.

"You can put on your swimsuit at the dorm, wear your clothes over it, and come along. It'll probably be unpleasant, but if you return to the dorm dressed the same way, everything should be fine," I said.

"No, no. That's not the problem. I really, really don't want to do this."

"I sympathize, but you basically can't refuse, can you?"

"Wow. You're the worst."

"My decision's final. You'll do as instructed." I pushed a handwritten note toward her, adding, "I've shown you some consideration."

"What the hell? You're using up my whole day, aren't you? And it's the last day of summer, too!"

"You said you planned to spend the day sleeping, right?" I countered. "I want you to join us at the pool. But I'm not telling you to participate."

Karuizawa read my note closely.

"Wait, what's the difference between 'join' and 'participate'?" she asked.

I explained in detail why I'd called her. Karuizawa heard me out, then cradled her head in her hands.

"What's the matter?" I asked her. "Got a headache?"

"Of course my head hurts! It hurts because you… No, forget it. It's meaningless. Can't you just ask Horikita-san? Aren't you close?"

"I can't rely on her. She doesn't know how I operate from the

shadows.”

“Huh? Why?” Karuizawa sounded incredulous. Her disbelief was to be expected. The correct plan of action would be to evade her question and mislead her, but instead, I decided to take things a step further.

“This entire time, even back when I contacted you on the ship, I’ve acted entirely on my own. I haven’t spoken with Horikita about this, because I still can’t trust her.” That was all true; I spoke no lies.

“What? You don’t trust her, even after all the time you’ve spent together? That’s weird.”

“She makes an excellent cover for me, like a magic cloak of invisibility. She’s conspicuous,” I replied.

“So, you’re just using her, then?”

“Not exactly, but in this particular situation, I’d say that’s about it.”

“Hmm? I don’t get what you’re saying. Seriously, can you knock off the vagueness?” Karuizawa flashed me a smile, though. “Still, your schemes have been successful so far, huh? I really thought that Horikita-san was the mastermind. Seriously, who are you?”

I didn’t respond.

“Well, whatever. I guess being more trustworthy than Horikita-san is a good thing,” she added.

That was right. Karuizawa was infinitely superior to Horikita in some ways, although I couldn’t explain that to her.

“So, I just need to carry out your orders?” she asked.

“Yes. Now that that’s settled, would you come with me for a little while? We need to take care of something in advance.”

“Well, I don’t exactly have the right to refuse.” Karuizawa stood and brushed dirt from her skirt, demonstrating just how quickly she wanted to end this. As for me, I didn’t want to waste any precious time, either. Together, we made our way toward the pool.

6.1

The night before I met with Karuizawa, I'd been enjoying the last fleeting moments of summer vacation in my dorm room when Ike, seemingly the three idiots' representative, posted in the group chat.

Is it really okay for summer to end like this? Our youth's slipping away.

It was simultaneously profound and moronic. Ike continued messaging before anyone had a chance to reply.

Is it really okay to let the precious summer vacation after our first year of high school end without experiencing anything amazing? he repeated, although this time, his phrasing was different.

No, it's not okay! replied Yamauchi, agreeing with Ike's sentiment. Considering that an unrequited love had broken Yamauchi's heart, he probably yearned for a fresh start.

Yeah, I want to make the most of my youth, too! added Sudou.

In that case, we should rise up! Youth won't come to those who wait. Now is the time of men who take the initiative! responded Ike.

Chasing youthful pleasures was all well and good, but how exactly were they going to go about it?

Do you have any good ideas? asked Yamauchi.

Ike was probably waiting for someone to ask that, because he posted a long message immediately afterward.

I thought of one! Right now, the pool's open to everyone, yeah? We'll invite those fine, gorgeous ladies to go swimming! I've got Kikyou-chan, right? Haruki, you go with Sakura. And Ken, you're with Horikita!

Ike rattled off girls' names, managing to casually reopen Yamauchi's wounds.

If Suzune is going, then I'm in. Do you think she'll go ? asked Sudou.

Leave that to Ayanokouji-sensei! Right?

I wanted to respond with “as if,” but I couldn’t just come out and say it.

I mean, you’re going to help, right? You’re my friend, right? Sudou’s message, casual as it was over chat, certainly sounded like a threat. I noticed that he only used the word “friend” when he needed something.

I’ll see what I can do. Don’t expect too much, I replied.

After that, I temporarily suspended the chat and tried giving Horikita a call. It wasn’t just for Sudou. A part of me also wanted to invite her, especially now that her perceived social status had begun to rise.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Can’t I call you without a reason?” I replied.

“Okay, I’m hanging up.”

“Wait, wait! Okay, to tell you the truth, some friends were talking about going to the pool tomorrow. They asked me to call you, since you’ve been sitting in your room all day every day.”

“By friends, you mean those three incredible idiots? I can’t imagine bringing myself to hang out with them.”

Three incredible idiots. It had a nice ring to it.

“I refuse,” Horikita said.

“Would you come if it was just the two of us?”

“No.”

Of course not. However, I had a secret weapon.

“Water bottle.”

Horikita’s attitude and aura changed drastically at those simple words, even over the phone.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, the words ‘water bottle’ have just been on my mind lately. Like getting your arm stuck in a water bottle. That kind of thing.”

“You have a very unpleasant phone manner.” Horikita

sounded increasingly concerned.

"I just think honesty does us all good."

"Okay. What do you need me to do tomorrow, and at what time?"

Horikita was desperate to protect her reputation. She'd do anything to keep people from finding out about the water bottle incident, including going to the pool.

"We'll meet at 8:30 in the lobby, and plan to go our separate ways in the evening," I said.

"Understood. But I won't forgive you if you ever try this again," she warned.

"O-okay."

I had no desire to tempt fate. I didn't think of this as blackmail, but rather, cashing in on the favor I did Horikita during the water bottle incident. She probably understood that.

I invited Horikita. I posted in the chat.

Great work, Ayanokouji! You've avoided being German suplexed onto concrete!

Apparently, my life had been in danger.

Invite Sakura for me! Please, I beg you, Ayanokouji! wrote Yamauchi.

He'd just been rejected the other day. Immediately afterward, he sent me a private message.

I don't want them to know I was rejected! Please help me!

Well, that was sad. The guys would probably love it if Sakura joined us, but she wasn't really a sociable girl. She always skipped swim class, because her chest size got her ogled by both sexes to a painful degree. It was also probably going to be awkward for her to go out with the guy she just rejected.

I decided I'd at least give her a call.

6.2

In the blink of an eye, the promised day arrived—summer vacation's final event. We'd agreed to meet at 8:30. Making my way downstairs to the lobby, I saw that most of the group had already assembled.

"You just barely made it, huh?" Horikita prodded.

"There's still about ten seconds left until we were scheduled to meet."

"The elevator's really swamped, right? That's why you were late, isn't it?" she shot back.

She was probably still angry about my coercive invitation. Plus, chances were she didn't like the company. Since Kushida, Sakura, Ike, and Yamauchi were coming to the pool, there wasn't really anyone else for Horikita to talk to.

"G-good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Morning, Sakura," I replied.

Sakura peeked up at me as she greeted me politely. Yamauchi appeared to be checking Sakura out, glancing at her from his peripheral vision. Sakura looked somewhat anxious.

I'd remember for reference that romantic confessions didn't necessarily result in happiness—they could cause trouble that persisted afterward, too.

"Where's Sudou?"

"He probably overslept," replied Horikita.

It was well past the time we'd agreed to meet, but there was no sign of Sudou. He was probably exhausted from club activities. Since no one was trying to contact him, I went for it.

"It's no use. The call's not connecting," I said.

The phone just kept ringing and ringing. I couldn't even reach his voicemail.

"Man, what the hell's Sudou doing? It's already 8:30! If we

don't hurry, we're not gonna be the first ones there!" shouted Ike. He looked at the elevator, tapping his foot.

"A-all right, I'll go wake him up," said Yamauchi. He got onto the elevator, looking uncomfortable with the awkward silence between him and Sakura. As soon as he left, the heavy atmosphere began to dissipate.

"Did something happen to him?" asked Horikita in a low voice. She must've noted the change. I scratched the back of my head as I considered how to answer.

"Several things happened," I replied. I left it at that. Neither Yamauchi nor Sakura would be happy if word got out.

"Oh, what's this? Horikita-san, everyone, good morning!"

As we waited for Sudou to arrive, Ichinose came down with three friends. Bath towels peeked out of the colorful plastic bags they carried.

"Are you guys heading to the pool, too?"

"Yes, that's exactly it."

The pool was the summer vacation's last special treat. It wasn't really strange that they were going.

"Well, why don't we all go together?" asked Ichinose.

"Of course, the more the merrier!" shouted Ike, jumping so high off the sofa that he looked like he was about to take off into orbit.

Horikita didn't utter a single word.

"Well, it's just… I'm sorry, but someone in our group overslept. We're waiting for him to come down. Another of our friends went to get him," explained Ike.

"Gotcha!" replied Ichinose cheerfully.

6.3

Sudou opened his mouth as wide as a crocodile's, yawning and tousling his mussed hair.

"Sorry I overslept. Got way too exhausted from all my club stuff," he said.

"Don't tell me that," replied Horikita.

Ichinose and her friends, who'd been waiting for Sudou so we could all go to the pool together, were talking with Kushida at the center of the group.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita said to me, ignoring Sudou. Sudou, for his part, glared at me. "Don't you think this is a little strange?"

"What is?"

"At a time like this, Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun would normally be pushing their luck, right?"

Sudou stiffened when he heard Horikita make that sharp observation. Since he was standing so close, she didn't miss that.

"Did something occur to you, Sudou-kun?" she asked.

"Not really," he muttered.

That only made Horikita look more guarded. Ike and Yamauchi walked together, shoulder to shoulder, both wearing stiff expressions.

"I can't help but think they have ulterior motives," said Horikita. She focused her attention on the bag that Ike held. "Even though they shouldn't have brought anything with them except towels and swimsuits, that bag looks really heavy."

Ike's bag appeared to weigh more than any of the guys there, myself included.

"Huh, really? Doesn't seem like that to me," replied Sudou nervously.

"It doesn't? Just look at the bag," Horikita pressed.

Horikita's suspicions had merit. The bag swung heavily back and forth when Ike walked, and it strained against his arm.

"Don't you guys have plans for after the pool? Maybe he brought stuff for that?" I said, backing Sudou up. Sudou grabbed the lifeline I gave him.

"Y-yeah. I think that's it."

"I see. I suppose that's credible," said Horikita.

It was a known fact that those three horny idiots loved women. Given how meek they suddenly were, it was no wonder Horikita felt concerned. The three were extremely nervous right then, and it wasn't because beautiful girls surrounded them. Nor was it because they'd be able to see those girls in swimsuits soon.

I decided to change the subject in order to maintain the deception.

"Sudou."

"Wh-what?"

"How'd your club activities go? Did you get any points?"

"Huh? Y-yeah, I got a few from playing in the tournament. I think about 3,000 points or so," he replied.

Sudou was being humble. Horikita looked genuinely impressed. "You gained points through personal activities?" she asked.

"Yeah. But lots of second and third years have gotten tens of thousands of points, so I can't get too cocky yet. If you accomplish a lot for a club, it can even affect your class points. I'm gonna try to do way more in the second semester and onward," he replied, crossing his arms and flexing in triumph.

Horikita, hearing of Sudou's success in a field she could not master, offered him honest respect. "The day when you contribute more significantly to the class might be near," she said.

To tell you the truth, I thought the same. If all went well, Sudou might become a net benefit to the class. That said, I concerns. Sudou made enemies easily. I needed to monitor him and Horikita, who had the same tendencies.

We made our way to the swimming club's special facility,

which adjoined the side of the school building. Since it wasn't part of the main building, we were allowed to enter without wearing our uniforms. It looked as though the pool would be a popular spot, especially considering that this was the last day.

Even before we got to the pool's entrance, students crowded the place. Just as you'd expect from a state-of-the-art school, every grade level had a separate locker room. It was easy to get lost there, but we followed the instructions on a signboard and found our way.

"Okay, let's meet up back here in twenty minutes," said Ichinose, pointing at the hallway that led to the pool. It was good to have an organized leader like her around.

"Hoo… Hoo…" Ike huffed.

As the girls walked off, Ike started breathing loudly, as if aroused. He walked faster, making him the first to arrive at the locker room. Inside, Ike and Yamauchi immediately went to the innermost locker, all the way in the back.

"H-hey, you guys. Today is going to be special. Don't you get that feeling?!"

"Yeah. We're going further than anyone in our class has gone. Further than anyone in our whole school!"

Ike and Yamauchi were attracting the attention of people around them. Sudou immediately went over and put both of them in headlocks, one in his left arm and one in his right.

"Geh! What the hell, Ken?!"

"You guys are causing too much ruckus! Look, I know you're impatient, but we can't get noticed," hissed Sudou.

"Y-yeah, guess you're right. Sorry, dude. Ow!"

Sudou smashed their foreheads together as a lesson. It was a little aggressive, but not a bad method.

"You're surprisingly calm, Sudou," I said.

"Guess I just wasn't expecting all that much, honestly. Besides, I dunno, it kind of feels wrong. When I really think about this, it'd make Suzune sad. I don't want them to see Suzune defenseless, you know? If you're a man, you gotta make a girl fall for you," he replied.

Sudou had the right idea. I wanted Ike and Yamauchi to learn that lesson themselves, but for the moment, their primary focus was immediate sexual gratification. I checked my phone. I had a message from Karuizawa saying that she'd just entered the locker room.

"Who's messaging you?" asked Ike, his face red and a suspicious gleam in his eyes. He tried to take a peek at my phone, so I quickly put it away.

"Come on. It's a girl, isn't it?"

"Do I look that popular?" I replied.

"I guess you got a point. All right, let's get changed! Spread out the towels!" shouted Ike.

I kind of wanted him to protest that I did look popular, but I let that expectation go. It was time to see how Ike and Yamauchi's luck would hold.

6.4

"Whoa, talk about luxury. It's completely decked out."

The large pool facility, normally used for club activities and regular practice, looked completely different today. A number of students crowded the area, but food stalls were also everywhere. Snacks and junk food were in abundance: hot dogs, yakisoba, okonomiyaki, and more.

Even weirder, upperclassmen seemed be managing the stalls. There were all types, from serious students who worked hard without so much as a smile, to students who looked like they were having a blast. It reminded me of the special tests.

Whatever was going on, it certainly seemed festive. While we stood around, waiting for the girls, I felt the group's mood begin to lift. I didn't know how we compared to other schools, but a lot of people at this school were more attractive than average. That included members of our group. We were surrounded by many gorgeous students whose names I didn't know. No wonder Ike and Yamauchi were so sex-mad.

Almost all of the male students suddenly focused their attention on a single point.

"Whew. This sure is a huge crowd, isn't it?" Ichinose caught up with us, apparently oblivious to everyone looking at her.

“Hey…”

Unsure where to look, I shifted my gaze toward the wall as I answered.

“Where are the others? I thought the boys would be faster,” she said.

“They’re still changing,” I answered. They were also late due to other…circumstances. “You got changed pretty quickly.”

“Ah ha ha! I’m pretty confident in my quick-change abilities,” Ichinose boasted, as though that was something to be proud of. Her sunny innocence might just be the secret to her popularity. “Oh! Ayanokouji-kun, you brought a rash guard?”

“This might be strange for a guy, but I don’t really like showing skin in front of people. I heard that it was okay to wear this when we aren’t in class.”

“I see. I think that’s fine. It doesn’t violate the rules, after all.”

A few other students were also covering up, even guys like me. Ichinose poked my vest-covered stomach with her index finger.

“You’re pretty hard. Also, you’re slender. You have the ideal amount of muscle, without being *too* muscular,” she observed.

She kept touching me all over, from my arms to my shoulders. I was lucky I’d had the funds to buy an outer garment. I needed to thank Katsuragi.

“Do you work out?” she asked.

“No. It’s probably just the material. I don’t exercise daily or anything,” I said.

“Hmm.”

Ichinose lowered her eyes to look at my legs, but at least stopped asking questions. Still, standing this close to her made me hyper-conscious of her monstrous—er, her very large breasts. How in the world could I swim in this condition? I doubted whether I’d even be able to move.

“Well, those guys are late. I think I’ll go check on them,” I said.

I knew full well what they were doing, and why they were

late, but I couldn't bear seeing Ichinose in her swimsuit anymore. I turned on my heel and headed for the men's locker rooms.

Several minutes later, we completed our preparations. We headed to the pool together. All the girls, including Horikita, had assembled.

"Wow!"

Ike couldn't help but exclaim when he saw the wondrous spectacle the girls presented. Sakura, however, retreated to the back of their group. She, of course, was wearing a rash guard, too. Even so, not all the guys were able to conceal their delight at seeing the girls wearing swimsuits.

"Gah, ah! I can see them. Their *breasts* , underneath those thin swimsuits! I can see them!"

Ike and Yamauchi stared at the girls as if they both had X-ray vision. They seemed to be having the time of their lives.

"Okay, how about we get going? Looks like that spot at the far back is open."

Ichinose led the way as we went to secure a place where we could hang out. The guys fell in line right behind the girls, their objective to ogle the girls' gently bouncing buttocks. However, Sudou didn't move from Horikita's side. They looked good together. I actually thought they would be a surprisingly good couple.

Meanwhile, I walked next to Sakura, which was becoming a habit.

"Ah. Thank you," she whispered.

"Why are you thanking me?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Sakura appeared puzzled. Then she realized that I had no idea what she was referencing. "Um, well. For inviting me out today."

"Huh? It's normal, after all. We're friends. Right?"

I said the word "friend" smoothly and easily. Sakura looked up happily, her eyes sparkling like a puppy's.

"So, you don't need to thank me," I said.

Sakura apparently didn't agree. "Still, thank you," she repeated.

“No, well… Well, okay.”

That was just the way Sakura was. It was why I could relax when I was with her.

Even so, she *had* become bolder. She’d matured to the point where I barely recognized her as the same girl I first met. A classmate had confessed romantic feelings toward her, and she hadn’t run away, but answered him properly. Watching her grow more and more each day, I thought that, maybe, I could change, too.

“I’ve been thinking, recently—during P.E., the teacher told us that swimming would definitely be useful to us later. I think that referred to the island test.” Sakura made this observation with a fiery look in her eyes. I decided not to deflate her.

“I see. Huh. That’s certainly true.”

“See, just like I thought!” She gave a small hop of joy, making her breasts jiggle beneath her rash guard. However, her expression turned apologetic the next moment. “If I participated properly, I think I’d be more useful. I used my poor health as an excuse to run away.”

“As long as you’re aware of that, isn’t it enough?”

The students who once lived solely for themselves, with no thought for the future, had slowly begun to realize that people couldn’t survive alone. Unless you planned to be a hermit, living on a mountain, you had no choice but to depend on other people.

The majority of junior high and high school students hadn’t noticed that yet, however. They lived in hedonistic isolation, spending their time on the Internet or feverishly engaging in mobile games. Some delinquents even committed crimes ranging from minor offenses to serious felonies. They didn’t know how to ask for help or cooperate with others. Some would spend their entire lives not knowing how.

This school was different, though. Their methods were unique, but they seemed to be trying to teach students how to become functional individuals.

Sakura had started to recognize that. She’d realized that maybe there was something *she* could do for the class. She might

eventually become a great asset to 1-D.

"Ichinose-san. You guys. You came here today, too, huh?"

Three male students called out to us as we looked for a spot. I recognized one: Kanzaki from Class B. He nodded to us.

"Yoo-hoo! Shibata-kun, you're here with the guys?" asked Ichinose.

Shibata raised his hand and looked at us Class D students with a smile. "Looks like a fun group! How about we join you?" he asked.

"I'm totally okay with that, but…is that all right?" asked Ichinose, looking at us.

Kushida nodded with enthusiasm, which annihilated Ike and Yamauchi's ability to veto the suggestion. The three Class B students joined us, making our group's total number a staggering thirteen members.

"Sorry for bothering you," said Kanzaki, approaching me. He understood that I wasn't especially good at dealing with a rowdy group.

Sakura quickly took a step back. She'd instantly faded into the background, so that Kanzaki wouldn't notice her.

"That's fine," I said. "It's the last day of summer vacation, after all."

"Well, it's true that we only have a few opportunities to socialize with students from other classes. Shibata and the others seem happy," replied Kanzaki.

"You don't really seem to like them, though," I said. Kanzaki looked calm and composed, as always. However, there'd been a slyness to the way he approached me, so as not to draw attention.

"I'm like you, Ayanokouji. I'm not good with crowds."

As Kanzaki and I chatted about nothing in particular, we heard increasingly loud cheers up ahead.

"Sounds like they're all fired up over something," said Sudou.

I raised my head to look. At the center of the uproar was a huge splash. A person and a ball flew upward into the air. The person delivered a powerful, aggressive spike that sent the ball

flying to the opponent's side of the pool. Apparently, they were playing volleyball.

"Whoa! Awesome! This is, like, some next-level stuff, huh?!" shouted Yamauchi.

There were three pools in the large facility, all currently being used for various activities and games. One pool was for standard swimming. Another was built to function like a lazy river with a current. The final pool was mainly geared toward activities like sports.

A large crowd of screaming girls surrounded the sports pool, in which students were playing a fierce game of volleyball. I'd never seen many of them before. The majority looked a little older than us. They were probably second or third-year students.

One male student, in particular, stood out.

"He's awesome."

The object of Sudou's expressed admiration was the same student I'd noticed. At first glance, his slender form appeared delicate. Upon closer inspection, though, you saw his well-defined abs. The way his blond hair swayed whenever he moved, and the composed expression on his face, caught the eye. He was so beautiful that you could almost mistake him for an illusion, an image flickering on a screen.

Apparently, this beautiful young man had stolen most of the female students' attention.

"Ugh, he's the kind of guy I hate the most. Even though he's not all that talented or hardworking, he's a winner because of his looks," spat Ike.

I understood Ike and Yamauchi's venomous envy, but they were wrong. This handsome man wasn't showered in attention due to his appearance. I saw the sharp gleam in his eyes as his attention focused upward. The beautiful young man soared into the air to meet the ball that a teammate passed him.

Most of the onlookers went quiet, as though they'd forgotten to cheer. Everyone watched with bated breath. The handsome student shot the bullet—er, the ball—at a sharp angle and with high velocity. It assaulted the enemy team. The student who received the

ball was clearly skilled, too. He responded quickly and dove to try to keep the ball in play.

Everyone screamed in unison as the beautiful young man's team earned a point. His physical abilities' superior nature was obvious. Looking at how developed the lower half of his body was, I guessed that he focused on a sport in which he used his legs. Maybe track and field? I could imagine baseball or soccer as well.

"H-he's handsome, he's smart, he's good at sports… Who the hell *is* he?!"

"People are really getting fired up, huh? That guy completely dominates the game all by himself."

"Looks like it. I'm not sure who he is or where he's from, though."

Horikita and I didn't know many students from other classes, or what their abilities were. The best person to ask was Kushida, whose network was wider than anyone else's. She had our answer.

"That's Nagumo-senpai from Class A. He's a second year. It sounds like he's really popular with the girls," she said.

"Nagumo…"

I'd heard that name recently. Eavesdropping on our conversation, Ichinose explained a bit more. "He's the current student council vice president. It's said that he'll take over as president next year. Apparently, he's really smart."

Horikita's shoulders tightened slightly when she heard the key words "student council."

Every time Nagumo showed off his skills, there were loud, high-pitched cheers. Other games were going on at the same time, but nobody watched. Everyone was fixated on Nagumo.

"Even though he's popular with the ladies, I've never heard of him until now. You didn't know him either, right, Ayanokouji-kun? He's obviously skilled, but considering his notoriety, I imagine some of that must be hype. I'm sure the student council president would easily surpass him in any activity. Wouldn't he?" asked Horikita.

What a brazen thing to say—praising the president without revealing that he was her brother.

“Yeah. They say the president is amazing. He’s possibly the most extraordinary student in this school’s whole history. Wait. He has the same last name as you, Horikita-san. Right?” asked Ichinose.

“It would appear so,” Horikita answered matter-of-factly. Apparently, she had no intention of giving an honest answer.

“But there are rumors that Nagumo has comparable skills. In fact, during the student council elections, President Horikita and Vice President Nagumo both ran for the position of president. At the time, Nagumo was just a first-year student,” said Ichinose.

“You’re quite well-informed, aren’t you?” replied Horikita.

“When I joined the student council, I inevitably picked up on those kinds of things.”

“You did?” Horikita sounded incredulous.

She couldn’t hide her surprise. I recalled that, the day I met her, she was talking to Hoshinomiya-sensei, Class B’s homeroom teacher, about “student council business.” I had absolutely no interest in working alongside Horikita Manabu, but given how the school was structured, entering the student council had to have monumental significance.

“By the way, what are the prerequisites for joining the student council? Not just anyone can join, right?”

“Hmm. Well, it’s a little tricky. To tell you the truth, I was rejected the first time I applied. But, since you can apply as many times as you want, I persisted,” said Ichinose. “The president never confirmed anything, but apparently, the final decision came from Vice President Nagumo. Later, I heard from Nagumo that President Horikita seemed disappointed in this year’s first-year students. Apparently, they usually accept two first-years, but this year, I’m the only one. That’s why I want to hurry up and prove myself. It sounds as though President Horikita might be stepping down in October.”

As Horikita struggled to get closer to her brother, Ichinose was trying her absolute hardest to gain some ground.

“My goal is definitely to be like Nagumo-senpai. We both started strong, and we get along well. All the student council

presidents in this school's history originally came from Class A, but Nagumo-senpai is like me. We both came from Class B. Then, before anyone realized it, he was next in line to become the president. So, that's why I'm going to become president after Nagumo-senpai."

Ichinose paused for a moment, then added, "Just kidding!"

She clearly held Nagumo in higher esteem than Horikita's brother.

Looking displeased, Horikita snapped back. "Nagumo's limited potential is obvious. He had a delayed start," she spat.

"Hey, hey," I said.

Horikita was free to think whatever she wanted, but didn't that logic work against her, based on the fact she'd started in Class D? Unless…unless she was serious.

"Wait. Do you *still* think they assigned you to Class D by mistake?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Horikita said without hesitation.

"Well, I suppose I can understand why you think that. But the school doesn't seem to sort classes based on academic ability alone. They examine your intelligence, of course, but also your maturity level and collaboration skills. They base their decisions on our demonstration of all those abilities, I think," mused Ichinose.

"So, you're saying there's a problem with me overall?"

"Oh, no. Sorry. I apologize if that's how it sounded. But think about it. Basically, Horikita-san, you're the sort of person who believes in herself. If we turn that statement around, though, it could also mean that you're self-centered. In the real world, there will be times when you need to determine who's better suited to a situation: a self-important person, or someone who follows instructions. Such decisions are made on a case-by-case basis."

Self-centered people could be hard to handle, even if they had superior talent. However, people who could follow instructions would always be in demand, a highly sought-after resource.

"I can't believe that," said Horikita in a low voice.

When Ichinose got called over by a friend, I drew slightly nearer to Horikita.

“You didn’t announce your candidacy for the student council, did you? You chose to attend this school to be by your older brother’s side, right?” I asked.

“Those are separate issues. Even you can grasp that much, can’t you? Even if I did the student council interview, there’s absolutely no way I’d get in.”

Well, yeah. If even Ichinose from Class B wasn’t accepted the first time, then Horikita from Class D… The elder Horikita probably wouldn’t allow his sister to join student council when he wanted her expelled.

I watched the game go on for a while. In the end, Nagumo’s team overwhelmed the opposition. The girls who’d cheered Nagumo gathered around him as he climbed out of the pool.

“Hey, wait a sec. That dude’s got an ear piercing! How is that okay?!” shouted Ike, clearly searching for something to say.

“But isn’t that fine? It’s still summer vacation,” replied Ichinose.

“W-well, wait a sec… He’s got a hole in his ear, right?! Isn’t that a big problem?!” Ike persisted.

“I think that’s probably a clip-on earring, actually. He dresses normally in school,” she answered.

“Ugh!” Ike grumbled. No matter how much he objected, Nagumo was a completely flawless student.

“Hey, why don’t *we* play some volleyball? With Shibata-kun and the other guys on our team, we’ll have six people, and you guys will have seven. If we rotate, we should be set,” said Ichinose.

Ike was the first one to agree. “Yeah, for sure! I’ll attract all the girls’ attention, like Nagumo-senpai!” he shouted.

That was probably impossible, but a lot of students seemed eager to play. Since we’d come all this way, they wanted a good experience.

“U-um, I’m pretty bad at physical activity, so…I’ll watch,” said Sakura, retreating. She probably just really didn’t want to play. Since it was obvious that she wasn’t the athletic sort, no one raised any objections.

“I don’t really feel like playing, either,” said Horikita. She seemed intractable, even though she still owed me a favor.

“Horikita-san, are you running away?” Ichinose smiled, as if to provoke Horikita.

“It’s not ‘running away’ when it’s just a simple game,” snapped Horikita.

“You’re certainly right. But this is like a microcosm of our class. Who’s more ambitious, and who has superior teamwork? In that sense, it’s a mock competition. Or are you saying that you don’t want to compete against us?” asked Ichinose. She was treating this like an analytical test of our combat ability.

“Fine. Let’s do it,” said Horikita.

The Class B students would be our rivals in the near future. This was just a game for now, but they probably wanted to ascertain their opponents’ abilities, too.

“How about this? To make the match a little more interesting, the winners gets to enjoy a free lunch, courtesy of the losers. Are you okay with those stakes?” asked Ichinose.

“Sure,” replied Horikita.

After we submitted our request to use a volleyball court, each team picked its own strategies. The rules we settled on dictated that there’d be fifteen points per set, with a three-set match. We would declare the first team to get two sets the winner. We would determine who served via rotation, and a person who scored would earn the right to serve again.

“Since we’re doing this, we’re going to win,” said Horikita.

“You’re unusually fired up, Horikita-san,” observed Kushida.

“With a free lunch at stake, sure. But it’s more than that. To buy lunch for this many people, you might have to spend up to 10,000 points. Even though they’re just private points, the difference between Class B and us could close by that much. On the other hand, if we lose, the gap would widen. It’s just like the special tests,” Horikita replied.

True. Two thousand points per person wasn’t a small expense.

“All right! Let’s definitely win this thing. Ken! Haruki!”

shouted Ike.

“Leave this to me, Suzune. If I’m here, we’ve got the strength of one hundred men. I’ll knock those meatheads down!” shouted Sudou.

“But isn’t meathead a word you’d use to describe yourself, Sudou?” I called.

“The hell, dude? You know, ‘meathead.’ Someone’s who got too much meat in their head. Like, their brains are too big, because they study too much. Right?”

Apparently, Sudou had wonderfully misunderstood the meaning of the word. Rather like a meathead.

“Forget it,” I replied.

Although Sudou dragged us down in academics, he might be an invaluable ally in a situation like this. I understood that Horikita would expect a lot from him. Sudou was the most athletic person in Class D. Well, Kouenji might present a challenge to our opponents, but it was probably best not to rely on him.

“Sudou, do you have any experience playing pool volleyball?”

“Nope. Played a little volleyball in class, though.”

“And yet you sound really confident.”

“Basketball’s like all other sports. An upperclassman I respect said that.”

Well, Sudou certainly believed in his own abilities. Horikita was about to determine whether or not he was all talk.

6.5

“All right, leave it to me!”

Sudou, looking up at the ball as it arced down, jumped into the air. Then, using his incredible body like a spring, he slammed the ball at the opposing team, as fast as a bullet. Ichinose tried her absolute hardest to keep the ball in play, but her movements in the water were slow and dull. She didn’t make it in time.

No one on the sidelines cheered for Sudou, but his power seemed greater than or equal to Nagumo’s.

“Yeah!”

Sudou struck a victory pose. I guessed that this was what they meant when they talked about “taking to something like a fish to water.” Horikita watched Sudou in apparent admiration.

“Wow, that was an amazing shot. You really got us good!” said Ichinose, scooping up the ball and handing it back to Sudou.

“Heh. Well, I guess a girl couldn’t really repel my attack. Suppose I need to dial it down, huh?” he boasted.

“Are you being sexist now? Don’t underestimate us girls,” said Ichinose, with a smile on her face and not a hint of anger in her voice.

The game started with Class B serving the ball, but Sudou’s incredible, furious skills got our team to a seven-to-three lead.

“Sudou-kun has a wide defensive range and really high attack power. We need to avoid his area as much as possible,” observed Kanzaki. He was clearly growing increasingly cautious of Sudou, who was pulling our team forward.

“Okay, Ichinose. Give me the ball. I’ve found our target!” shouted Shibata.

“Roger!” responded Ichinose.

Ichinose received the ball and courteously guided it along. Shibata leapt up to strike it. Sadly, he aimed at the space right in

front of me. If that wasn't a coincidence, then he considered me our team's weakest link.

"Get it, Ayanokouji!"

I took a step forward, as Sudou ordered. The ball wasn't really moving fast. It shouldn't have been difficult for me to touch it. I extended my arm.

Bap . The ball made a dull sound as I hit it.

"Geh."

It sailed away magnificently in the wrong direction.

"Yay!"

On the other side of the net, Ichinose and Shibata high-fived. Naturally, Sudou shot me a furious glare and stormed over.

"The hell was that?!" roared Sudou.

"Er, I guess it showed the virtue of scoring quietly, rather than flamboyantly?" I replied.

"Don't screw around. It's fine if your angle's bad, but at least get the ball into the air."

This was the first time I'd ever played volleyball in my life. I couldn't just become a natural in five minutes.

"Hey, hey. Calm down, Sudou. I'll get things back with my astonishing serve. Check it," said Ike, picking up the ball.

"Yeah!"

The ball awkwardly sailed towards our opponents' territory. The girls caught it, and Ichinose leaped up to pitch it at us.

"You guys are useless!" shouted Sudou.

He blocked the ball that Ichinose sent back and returned it to Class B's side once again. This time, Kanzaki sent the ball into the air, and another girl lobbed it in my direction. The ball sped toward me, but Sudou took advantage of his height to try and intercept it. Covering me, he charged forward and successfully tossed the ball back.

"Eat *this* !" shouted Ichinose. She jumped upward, her breasts jiggling, which instantly snatched the attention of Ike, Yamauchi, and I.

“Back!” shouted Sudou. Horikita received Ichinose’s shot, and sent the ball back up, guiding it to a more ideal spot. The game had just begun, but already, Sudou was calling the shots.

None of the girls could stop Sudou’s attacks, considering his overwhelming power. Kanzaki and Shibata managed to hang on, but Sudou had both superior technique and greater strength, so they were on the defensive.

Class B’s only viable strategy was to deny Sudou the ball. On Class D’s side, Horikita and Kushida had above-average offensive and defensive power. A stable lineup. On the other hand, the weak links included me, Ike, and Yamauchi.

“Gyah! Sorry!” shouted Yamauchi.

Instead of scooping up the serve, Yamauchi let Class B score another point. Every time they scored, Sudou’s frustration grew, and he clicked his tongue at us. Then again, all Class B’s points were because of us three.

“Calm down, Sudou-kun. You’re doing your best, and it’s better if you don’t waste your energy.”

“But if we lose because of these useless guys, this’ll all be for nothing,” Sudou lamented.

Still complaining, Sudou returned to his original position. When Sudou couldn’t see him, Ike flipped him off. Yamauchi followed suit.

“Hey, Haruki. You’re gettin’ the death sentence later.”

“Gyah!”

Unfortunately for Yamauchi, Sudou had caught him in the act. This really wasn’t Yamauchi’s lucky day. When we resumed playing, the ball once again came flying straight toward him.

“No way, no way!” Yamauchi gurgled, falling face down in the water. “Gluuub!”

“It’s pathetic that the girls are more useful than you!” said Sudou.

Talk about kicking us when we were down. No one wanted to look uncool in front of girls, but just as you couldn’t improve you grades overnight, we couldn’t become stellar athletes right here and

now.

The ball once again came to me. Remembering my previous failure, I tried to figure out how best to receive it. I thought that by watching my arm placement, and the ball's rotation, getting it back into the air shouldn't be difficult. Theoretically.

However, I noticed Ichinose gazing intently at me from the other side of the net. I decided to receive the ball in a deliberately clumsy manner, without moving from my spot. I let my feet slip and fumbled the ball into the water.

"God. You're awful, Ayanokouji!"

As I resurfaced, Ike laughed at me.

"Even if it's bad, it's okay, as long as you get the ball up! Good job!" shouted Sudou.

Sudou, who'd been shadowing me, showed off several fierce jumps. Even though he should've used up quite a bit of stamina, he unleashed his finishing attack over and over again. His strength alone made us a match for Class B, even with their superior teamwork. While I observed Sudou, I decided to amuse myself by actually playing some volleyball.

6.6

"Aww, we lost. Completely," said Ichinose, sounding a little frustrated as she got out of the pool.

Sure, we were just playing, but no one had wanted to lose. Class D achieved victory after winning two consecutive sets.

"That's all thanks to Sudou-kun," said Horikita.

Sudou smiled smugly at this compliment. He was undoubtedly happy that the girl he liked had praised him, especially since Horikita was sparing with compliments.

"You're in basketball. Some boys from our class play, too, but I've heard about you, Sudou-kun. They say you're the best first-year student," said Ichinose.

"Of course," he replied.

More importantly, that meant word had gotten around to other classes. I wondered if this volleyball

game was just a test. Sudou's athleticism was a match for the upperclassmen. Any exam that depended on physical activity would be a huge boon for Sudou, and for us. From Ichinose's perspective, Sudou was now a threat.

"If you guys hadn't dragged us down, we could've had an overwhelming victory," said Sudou.

"Damn it. Sudou's getting full of himself," said Yamauchi. He collapsed outside the pool, glaring at Sudou with frustration. After the volleyball game was done, Sudou had kept his promise to deliver a death sentence to Yamauchi, and knocked him out.

"Well, as long as we won, it's all good. This means we can eat whatever we want for lunch," I said, redirecting Sudou's focus from anger to food.

"Yeah, guess so. Since we're pretty broke, this is good." Sudou was acting a little cocky, but he deserved to. He'd won the game single-handed.

“Well then, how about lunch?”

Our stomachs grumbled, right on cue. Ichinose, Sudou, and the rest headed toward the food stands. Horikita hung back and followed further behind.

“Ayanokouji-kun. You’re not really bad at sports, are you? Even though you’re a beginner at volleyball, your movements were odd,” she observed.

Horikita had seen me fight her brother some time ago. She recalled how I’d moved.

“Ichinose was watching me closely,” I answered.

“You’re not going to show your hand yet, then. I suppose the other classes must be frantically trying to analyze Class D’s combat abilities right now,” replied Horikita.

As we arrived at the food stands, Ichinose turned to us. “Just as we promised, you can have whatever you like, and however much you want. Eat up!” she said.

“All right! In that case, we’re not holding back!”

The three idiots, their appetites many times greater than anyone else’s, rushed for the food. Ichinose just stood there, grinning.

“Wait, are you paying for the whole thing yourself?”

“Yeah. I’m the one who suggested the bet,” Ichinose replied. That might be true, but this was going to be stupidly expensive. “I’m pretty frugal, so everything should be just fine.”

Kushida appeared puzzled. “But, Ichinose-san, didn’t you use up quite a few points on stuff like swimwear? I know Class D can’t compare itself to Class B, but we’re just barely getting by.”

“Hmm. Well, I don’t really care much about fashion. I kinda wear whatever, and I can just rotate outfits anyway. I guess that’s sort of weird for a girl to say,” Ichinose chuckled.

“Not at all. It’s good not to spend a lot, I think.”

In my own prejudiced view, girls cared about looking good. That was certainly true of Kushida. I would’ve thought that Horikita was indifferent, but even she seemed to pay attention to her hair and clothes.

“There might be something more important for me to use points on eventually,” said Ichinose.

“All right, then. I won’t hold back,” said Horikita. She’d always been a light eater, but having Class B treating us seemed to make her gluttonous.

“Sure, that’s fine. But it’d be a waste to have leftovers, so eat everything!” said Ichinose.

I was personally pretty interested in the junk food, and chose what I wanted.

6.7

When it was almost closing time, Ichinose proposed that we head back before the crowds got worse. We all agreed. While everyone got changed, I slipped away and waited for my visitor by the pool.

"Ah, I'm so drained," I muttered.

Soon Karuizawa appeared, slapping my back as she walked up behind me.

"Good work. How'd it go?" I asked.

"It's just like you said. Honestly repulsive," she replied.

"Come on, don't say that. It's just youth run amok, right?"

Karuizawa gestured as though she was going to vomit, then scanned her surroundings.

"How was it? Being at the pool, I mean," I asked.

"Whatever. I don't feel much of anything, but…" Karuizawa looked around once more, as if worried about prying eyes. "Even though it's fake, I'm still supposed to be going out with Hirata-kun. If I'm seen alone with you, weird rumors might spring up."

"Really? Well, maybe they would if I were a pretty boy like Hirata. Sadly, I'm completely lacking in hotness. At best, people will think you're part of our group," I told her.

This was an innocuous place to be alone with a girl. It would have been a different story at night, on a secluded park bench, but not here.

Hirata, Karuizawa's fake boyfriend, was nowhere to be seen. He was probably busy with club activities. I didn't know much about the soccer club's schedule, but he seemed like an active guy.

"We were allowed to wear rash guards today. You saw them, right?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. But are you really okay with spending money on a rash guard? They're pretty expensive."

“It was a necessary expense.”

Karuizawa held out her hand, and I grabbed it. I felt something hard against my palm.

“What are you planning, anyway?” asked Karuizawa.

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you different from the others? You could just sit back and enjoy the show,” she said. Ah, so we were discussing what I held in my hand.

“It could have ended up fracturing the class. I want to avoid that.” That was why I’d called Karuizawa to meet me, although getting her to enjoy the pool had been another of my goals. “Did you invite anyone else?”

“I’m alone. I was with two others, but I told them to go off on their own and have fun.”

“A wise decision.”

I started walking slowly along the side of the pool. Karuizawa trailed me.

“Are you aiming for Class A, then?” she asked.

“You’re not interested?”

“Hmm, I dunno. I *do* want points, and I’d be happy to get a job anywhere, but…” She kicked the air, hands in her pockets. “I don’t really feel like duking it out with those Class C students, I guess.”

Karuizawa was referring to a specific group of Class C girls. Even though I’d managed to contain things to a degree, Karuizawa couldn’t face the girls directly without triggering the past trauma of them bullying her. Until that mental prison released her, Karuizawa could never demonstrate her true talents.

“I want to talk to you about something. Just you,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know what our next test will be, but I was thinking about preparing a certain trick.”

“A trick?”

As we walked, blending into all the hustle and bustle, we discussed extremely important things. Things I hadn’t even talked to

Horikita about.

“To have someone expelled.”

“Huh?”

Karuizawa stopped dead in her tracks, as though she didn’t understand what I meant. When I continued walking, she hurriedly chased after me.

“W-wait a minute. What do you mean?!”

“Exactly what I said. I’m going to have a first-year student expelled. The ideal candidates would be those three girls who know about your past. If we can’t get to them, then perhaps someone else. If that doesn’t work, then—” I began.

“Th-then what?”

“Probably some unnecessary human being from Class D.”

“You do understand what you’re saying, don’t you? Getting someone expelled isn’t that easy,” Karuizawa replied.

“You don’t think so? That’s not really true. I actually have the option available right now.” Fingers wrapped tight around the object Karuizawa had handed me, I drew her attention to my hand.

“Wait, don’t tell me. Is that what it’s for?” she asked, incredulous.

“Depending on the situation, I could get someone expelled in a single stroke. Right?”

“B-but wait. Why are you talking about this? You went all out trying to save Sudou-kun earlier, right?”

It was true that I’d rescued Sudou from the threat of expulsion. However, that was before I was forced to commit to reaching Class A. As Horikita once said, I had to prepare for the eventuality of cutting off people who dragged us down.

“Even though you saved Sudou-kun, you’re going to kick him out?” Karuizawa asked.

“Oh no. I have no intention of getting rid of Sudou. His physical skill will be quite valuable to Class D,” I replied. There weren’t many other students in the whole school with comparable abilities, including Kouenji.

“But what will happen to our class points if someone is expelled?” wondered Karuizawa apprehensively.

“The best option would be to expel someone from another class, of course.” However, if a student from our class was expelled, fear would motivate the survivors to struggle mightily. That wouldn’t be the worst thing.

“You’re awful, you know that?” said Karuizawa.

“Surely you already realized that about me?”

“I guess.”

I’d threatened Karuizawa. My actions had verged on assault. I couldn’t imagine that she considered me a good person.

“How about consulting Hirata-kun?” she asked.

“I have concerns about that. Hirata still isn’t someone I can fully trust,” I replied.

“Huh?”

“You know about his past?”

“Oh, yeah. He told me about it when I told him what happened to me. His friend tried to commit suicide by jumping, right?”

That was right. Hirata had told me that he still carried that regret around with him, which was probably true.

“Do you really believe that his friend’s suicide attempt turned him into a student who’d be placed in Class D?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“That can’t be the only reason for the school to assign a highly intelligent and immensely popular student to our class. Don’t you agree?” Placement in Class D would have been understandable if Hirata had poor attendance, or low grades like Karuizawa, but that didn’t appear to be the case.

“Wait. You asked about my past because…”

“I wanted to understand Hirata’s situation. Past trauma doesn’t equate to getting placed in Class D,” I replied.

Confirming things with Karuizawa had convinced me that she was someone I could trust. However, Hirata wouldn’t be easy to

deal with. I'd need to discreetly figure out whether he was telling the truth or lying.

"You keep trying to gather information by poking and prodding, but you're not telling me anything," grumbled Karuizawa.

"Hmm?"

"You're not normal, like, at all. Something definitely happened to you."

"Nothing really happened to me," I replied.

"That's a lie."

Nothing had happened. I wasn't bullied in the past like Karuizawa, and I hadn't had a beloved friend attempt suicide like Hirata, either.

"I can tell just from your eyes. You look like you could kill someone without hesitation."

"Nothing that dramatic took place in my past."

There really was nothing. So little had happened to me that I had nothing to talk about. My life was a blank slate.

Karuizawa's eyes locked onto me. She probably couldn't help but wonder what her future contained. Holding onto that fear could most certainly prove useful.

However, she'd asked me what I intended to do. Almost as if answering that question, I clenched my fist tighter. As I did so, I heard the plastic in my hand bend and crack.

"H-hey!"

I walked to the garbage bin and tossed away the bits of plastic.

"I won't expel anyone from Class D. It's about time for me to get back to the group. Thanks for today," I said.

"Okay…"

"Let's head back, then."

As the pool closed, students started to flood into the locker rooms. Which group you belonged to seemed to determine when you headed back. There were groups that left before closing, like Ichinose's, groups that left just when the closing call came, and

groups that remained in the pool until the very last second. I wondered which groups would make it back the fastest.

We quietly watched the other students as they walked away. After some time, the area was deserted, except for some lifeguards.

“You’re still not heading back?” I asked.

“You already know the answer, so why even ask?” Karuizawa lightly patted the spot on her rash guard right above her scar. She looked desperate. Still, it wasn’t like she could go home without changing. She had to wait until she was the last person in the locker room.

“It would be fine if you just wore a school-issued swimsuit, right?” I asked. No one would notice her scar.

“Ugh, swim with one of those on? No way. They’re too lame. I already hate having to wear one during lessons.”

Apparently, the world of girls was crueler than I thought. Even an unfashionable bathing suit could demote you on the social ladder.

“Do you like swimming?”

“Huh? Well, I don’t hate it,” she said.

“How about taking a little swim now? There aren’t any students around. The only people here are lifeguards, and they look busy cleaning up.”

Karuizawa pondered the idea. After all, it was better than the crowded locker rooms.

“I’m okay,” she muttered.

“Come on.”

“No, I won’t ‘come on.’ I told you, I don’t want to.”

“Even if someone sees you, you’ll be fine, as long as you’re wearing the school swimsuit.”

“That’s not the problem. Why do I have to show you my swimsuit?” she huffed.

So, that was what held her back. In that case, I thought perhaps I should use a slightly more aggressive method.

“That’s an order.”

Karuizawa glared at me.

“You seriously are the worst. I absolutely hate you.” She scowled.

“You decide whether to obey me or not. So, what’ll it be?”

“I understand,” she replied.

Karuizawa reluctantly did as instructed, pouting with dissatisfaction. She removed her rash guard and left it on a chair. I inspected her in her swimsuit. Karuizawa stood with her back to me, not turning around.

“Maybe this will be the only thing I can wear swimming for the rest of my life,” she muttered. She was still terrified that her scar would draw people’s attention.

I closed the distance between us and grabbed her arm.

“Wh-what are you—?!”

I shoved Karuizawa into the pool. *Splash* ! She crashed into the water. When a lifeguard heard the noise, she shouted at us with a megaphone.

“We’re closed! Please leave right now!”

“Pwah! What’d you do that for?!” Karuizawa shouted.

As she peeked angrily out from the water, I offered her my hand.

“Did you have fun?” I asked.

“Being pushed in isn’t exactly fun, you know.”

Karuizawa took hold of my outstretched hand. Then, without warning, she pulled me into the water. I didn’t resist at all, taking care not to crash into her when I fell. The resulting splash, even bigger than before, would certainly anger the lifeguards. Karuizawa laughed as they rushed over to us.

When I tried to surface, she held my head down and pushed me deeper underwater. Even though the situation was childish,

seeing Karuizawa enjoy something ended up making it worthwhile.

6.8

After we finished swimming, I was rather thirsty. The rest of our group must've felt the same way, because as dusk fell and we walked back to the dorms, one of Ichinose's friends said, "Hey, Honami-chan. I think I want ice cream. How about you?"

"Yeah. Sounds good," Ichinose replied. Even after a refreshing swim, the heat was oppressive. "How about we take a little detour before heading back?"

There were no objections. We entered a nearby convenience store, and everyone rushed to the ice cream. Horikita had been conflicted over whether she wanted something to drink, but now it looked like she wanted ice cream, too.

"I'll have this one! Ultra Choco Monaka!" shouted Ike, pulling out an ice cream three times larger than normal. It was nearly four times the price of a regular ice cream, too.

That seemed wasteful, but I supposed if it made him happy, it was probably fine. Sudou and Yamauchi wanted shaved ice, while Ichinose chose a popsicle. Even in a standard convenience store, the group's individual quirks and tastes were clear.

Sakura, standing behind me, looked around hesitantly.

"What are you getting?" I asked.

"Um, I-I… Wh-what do I pick, I wonder?" she stuttered.

Sakura stood on tiptoe and desperately struggled to look inside the ice cream freezer. Honestly, even I could barely see. When Ike and the others finally left, I felt Sakura push against me.

"What should I do?" she muttered. Her hands shook, as if she were flustered.

"You don't like ice cream?"

"Oh no, I like all kinds. I've probably eaten everything here before," she replied, pointing toward the right half of the case. Horikita, who'd also remained by the freezer, chose her ice cream and went to the register.

“Hurry up, or you’ll get left behind!” Ike called.

Given how sensitive Sakura was, hearing that only made her more flustered. “Um, umm… Sorry. I’m the type who takes forever deciding things like this.”

“There’s no need to panic. He’s just messing around. I haven’t decided yet, either,” I told her.

“What are you going to have, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Me?”

I shifted my attention from Sakura and looked into the freezer. Honestly, everything looked the same.

“I think I’ll have this.”

I picked up a standard soft-serve ice cream, the kind that coils around and around. Some of the soft serve had chocolate mixed in, but I’d leave that for next time.

“W-well, I’ll have that too, then. It’s delicious,” Sakura replied.

It felt as though I’d forced her to choose that, but if Sakura was satisfied, then it was probably fine. After we paid and left, everyone gathered in front of the store and began to eat. I opened the package and scooped some ice cream, letting it melt in my mouth.

“This is…really good,” I said quietly.

The sweetness and coldness shivered through my body. This could become a habit. It was honestly revelatory. Who knew ice cream would be this delicious? Eating too much of it could be bad for you, though.

“Whoa, you sure are enjoying that. It’s almost like it’s your first time eating ice cream,” observed Ichinose.

“Anyone would think it’s delicious. Especially in this heat,” I replied. That should’ve been obvious.

“Well, I suppose. It’s just…you’re eating it like it’s something you really love. This is the first time I’ve seen you make a face like that.”

“That’s because he has a face like a doll. His expression never changes,” said Horikita, interjecting on my behalf. Well, she was sort of like a doll herself in that regard.

Horikita and Ichinose began to chatter happily about the second semester, which was about to start.

“Hey, Ichinose. Your popsicle looks pretty rough.”

“Gah! You’re seriously right!”

Ichinose’s popsicle was melting in the heat. Flustered, Ichinose licked what was dripping and then stuck the popsicle in her mouth.

“Mmph, famks bery mug,” she muttered through a mouthful of popsicle.

Was she saying, “Thank you very much”? It seemed that way. Even as it melted, the popsicle did look delicious.

6.9

“Whew! What a long day. I’m beat. This was fun, huh?” asked Ichinose.

“Yeah. It was nice to talk to Horikita-san and Sakura-san. We should hang out again!”

The Class B girls seemed satisfied with how they’d spent their last day of vacation. Sakura, who looked a little more relaxed, even managed a small grin. On the other hand, Ike, Yamauchi, and even Sudou looked anxious. After quickly saying their farewells, they rushed into the elevator.

“We’ll come hang out in your room later, Ayanokouji.”

They left it at that.

“I wonder what’s up with them? I thought they were in high spirits today,” said Kushida.

“They seemed especially strange. Perhaps a certain someone knows what happened, though,” said Horikita.

They both glanced at me, but I refrained from commenting, for my own reasons.

“Okay, then. See you at school, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“See you tomorrow.”

After parting with Kushida and Sakura, only Horikita and I remained in the lobby. I thought she’d stayed behind to avoid Kushida, but even when another elevator arrived, Horikita didn’t get on.

“You’re not going up?” I asked.

“What about you? Would you like to take a little walk?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Horikita and I walked along the tree-lined path while looking at the sky, now dyed the color of sunset.

“Surprisingly, I had fun today. I suppose a day off every once in a while isn’t so bad.” That was an unexpected statement, coming from Horikita. She spoke slowly, her still-wet hair fluttering behind her. “We start the second semester tomorrow. I’m sure even bigger challenges await.”

“Yeah, probably.”

This wasn’t an ordinary school. Countless unknown hardships —like the survival test on the island, or the test of deception on the cruise ship—undoubtedly lay in wait for us.

“I’ve thought a lot during summer vacation. About the things I’ve done, and the things I was able to do,” Horikita continued.

“And what do you think now?” I asked.

“That’s a secret. If I told you, you’d laugh.”

She dodged the question, although I didn’t know why. Maybe she was embarrassed by what she’d been about to say.

Chapter 7:
Ike, Yamauchi, and Sudou's Summer Vacation (Extra Stories)

What should a man aim for in life? If you asked men from all over the world, you'd probably see a pattern emerge: find a partner and make love, produce offspring, raise those offspring. Amusement parks, movies, and video games are all very well. However, the plethora of entertainment options available to us these days is just a blip in the grand scheme of human history. Nearly all living beings have sought to pass the torch on to the next generation since ancient times.

However, young high school boys have no understanding of what it means to bring forth the next generation. Instead, they simply seek any and all immediate available sexual gratification.

"Now then, I'd like to hold a strategy meeting regarding Operation Delta."

Ike, from Class D, knelt on the floor. He used his clenched fist to wipe the sweat that began to trickle down his forehead. "I'd lay my life on the line for Operation Delta. Haruki, how about you?"

"I feel the same as you, Kanji. If this operation is a success, I won't even mind dying!" Yamauchi shouted.

Sudou, who'd silently observed so far, chimed in. "Honestly, I'm against it. I'll make a decision after I hear you out."

"So then, Ayanokouji, you're joining in too, right?"

"Is it okay if I turn on the air conditioner?" I asked. No good would come of the room reeking of sweat.

"Sure. It's hot."

They'd denied my first request to switch it on—something about "setting the mood"—but since we were meeting in my room, I'd had enough.

"Why is it always, *always* my room?"

“Didn’t I tell you before? It’s because you have the neatest, cleanest place. Other people’s rooms have tissues and shed hair and junk everywhere, and they’re dirty. There ain’t even enough room to put a foot down in Yamauchi’s place.”

“Sudou, your room’s the same, right? I mean, you got clothes and underwear and stuff all over.”

I wished they’d think about tidying up, rather than comparing their levels of filthiness.

“You know, no matter how much time passes, this room still doesn’t feel lived in. Nothing’s changed since enrollment, y’know? How about, when you get some points, you go out and buy something?”

“The next thing you buy should be carpet, dude. *Carpet* . My ass hurts,” said Sudou, sitting on the floor. He’d made similar statements in the past.

“I can’t just go out and spend precious points.”

For some reason, Sudou kept hounding me. “We got points for the island test, thanks to Suzune. Someone as useless as you shouldn’t hoard points,” he shot back.

“That’s definitely true. Actually, with Horikita on our side, it’s just a matter of time until we get up to Class C’s point total, right?”

Things had changed since our hopeless situation back in May. Now, with a fresh new surge of points, we were closing the gap between us and the upper-level classes.

“Come on, guys. Let’s think about the tough stuff when we’re in second semester. Right now, it’s Operation Delta.”

“Are you guys seriously doing this?”

“Very seriously. I mean, this is the prime of our youth, right? Or are you saying you don’t like Operation Delta?!”

“Call it whatever you want, but it’s basically just peeping. Right?”

“To peep at girls’ naked bodies… What’s wrong with that?! That’s youth!” Ike shouted.

Actually, it was a crime, and a horrible one at that. It was the kind of thing that would land Ike on the news if he were ever

caught in the act.

“What’ll you do if the girls find out? They’ll be worse than angry, you know.” I tried to discourage the three.

Sudou seemed to sense my doubts, because he voiced the same concerns. “It’s dangerous, like Ayanokouji says. This isn’t the same as changing into our gym clothes in the classroom, back in elementary school, or peeping at the bath in some old-fashioned inn during a junior high field trip.”

“Don’t worry. The supercomputer known as Ike Kanji-sama devised this plan,” said Ike. He got up and confidently, arrogantly, began to explain it.

“When will we be peeping, and from where? Those are your questions, right? Don’t worry. I’ve thought everything out. Please calm down, and just listen to what I’m about to say. First, we will carefully select our target. It would be a complete waste of energy if we ended up half-assing the operation and peeping on some uggo. Also, we’ll choose from the girls in Class D. You can only achieve maximum arousal by seeing the naked body of a cute girl you know in everyday life,” said Ike.

“I agree, but none of us have really taken things to the next level with any of the girls, right?”

“It’s okay. We’ll just get ourselves to the next level. You must achieve these kinds of milestones yourself,” replied Ike. He tapped his phone and turned the screen toward us. “Did you forget? The pool’s been open since yesterday!”

“R-really? Okay then, yeah. If that’s true, we can peep! Right? I’ve never been there before. The pool, I mean,” Haruki yammered.

Looking at Ike’s phone, I saw a notification saying that the pool was open for public use for the last three days of summer vacation. Operating hours were from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.

“I get that inviting the girls to the pool means they’ll have to change into swimsuits. But I don’t see how that’s going to give you an opportunity to peep,” I said.

I’d never gone to the special swimming facilities before, but there would likely be surveillance cameras. If a suspicious man approached the women’s locker rooms, staff would confront him.

Ike remained calm, arms crossed. His expression didn't change. "Damn, dude. That makes me sad. Do you really think I'm so stupid that I wouldn't think of something like that? I've been making preparations for a long while now, dreaming of this day."

"A long while? Okay, then, tell me this crucial peeping method," snapped Yamauchi, unable to stomach more of Ike's boasting.

"Oh, you want me to show my hand, eh? All right. Feast your eyes on *this* ," said Ike.

He'd actually drawn up a map of the facility. Sudou and Yamauchi gasped in apparent wonder, and I was surprised, too. The map was even pretty detailed.

But something was odd. The handwriting on the map was different from Ike's.

"Check it out. The special pool is at least twice as big as the one we use for our classes. As you would guess, there are surveillance cameras."

The pool was a large-scale facility with locker rooms for men and women. Naturally, the locker rooms were on opposite ends of the hallway. The surveillance cameras' locations were marked on the map.

Diverging paths separated the locker rooms, similar to men's and women's baths. Even if we took a single step toward the girls' locker room, we'd be noticed. On top of that, since it'd be the last day of summer vacation, there'd probably be a lot of people around. Our chances of success were slim to none.

"I mean, I don't think we're gonna be able to just stroll over and peep. Here's the crucial point: the ventilation route that runs along the floor. That vent connects the men's *and* women's locker rooms. What's more, they divide the lockers by year, from first-year to third-year students. The men's and women's lockers rooms are connected by their respective year, which means the first-year men's room is connected to the first-year women's. It's a miracle!"

I understood. If things went according to plan, we'd be able to see the girls change through the vent.

However, could the vent fit a person?

“The vent’s fifteen centimeters high and forty centimeters wide.”

“No one could pass through that.”

“Heh heh. I took everything into account. We also have this!”

Ike pulled out a small toy car out of his bag. An antenna stuck out the top.

“RC!”

A radio-controlled car that you could move freely via remote control. A camera was installed on the car’s roof. It was linked to a small display on the remote control. After Ike put in some batteries and started it up, the camera feed appeared on the remote. It wasn’t high-resolution, but it was enough.

Ike really had been preparing for a while.

“This should fit into the vent. After that, all we need to do is move the car while watching what’s on the camera. We can even save the images on the memory card!”

Ike had concocted his plan in the depths of deepest darkness. I wondered just what terrifying things he imagined on a regular basis. This was a criminal act, thank you very much. Not even Yamauchi could be okay with this.

“Oh! Awesome! Dude, this is perfect! Right, Ken?!”

So, Yamauchi agreed. He was happily, gleefully going along with it.

“Guess so. Kinda feels over the top, doesn’t it?” asked Sudou.

“What do you mean?! This is perfect!”

It was certainly true that we could probably get away with this without being noticed. Really, Ike had taken meticulous care in his preparations. I hazarded a guess.

“Did the Professor have a hand in this peeping operation, by any chance?” I asked.

I could hardly imagine that Ike came up with this all by himself. An RC car wasn’t cheap.

“H-how did you—?!”

None of this was Ike’s forte. Besides, only someone who knew

the locations of the surveillance cameras and ventilation routes could dream this up.

“Damn it. Guess there’s no hiding it. You’ve found me out. You’re right, I asked the Professor. Shit, dude, and after all the trouble I took to make you think I planned the whole thing.” Ike groaned.

“So, what’s the plan?”

Booted back to square one, Ike started explaining again.

“First, we’ll invite the girls we want to peep on to the pool tomorrow. Then, we’ll enter the locker rooms at almost the exact same time they do. Got it? Inside, we immediately go to the vent in the back. If someone is using that spot, Sudou will threaten them, and make them move. After that, we pull out towels, act like we’re going to change, and form a human wall around the vent so that no one else can see. Then I’ll remove the hatch and insert the RC car. I’ll operate it, so I need you guys to hide me. I’ll stop the car right in front of the girls’ locker room, and start recording. Once we’ve determined that they’re done changing, we’ll get the car back out,” explained Ike.

The steps were relatively simple and easy to understand. However, some parts felt a little iffy. I couldn’t just ignore them.

“So, I threaten people who get in our way, and make them move. I also need to make sure people don’t get close to us, right?” That role was appropriate for Sudou. Given his reputation, other students probably wouldn’t approach us casually.

“You guys see just how incredible Operation Delta is?” asked Ike.

“B-but, Kanji. This is a crime, dude. Like, the sin is gonna weigh heavier on me than the actual peeping.”

“You’re certainly right. It’s a crime. Strictly speaking, that is. However, think about your past. You’ve committed crimes before, right?” Ike gloated.

“Huh? The hell does that mean? What crime did I ever commit?” Sudou snapped.

“Let me ask you this, Ken. If you’re aggressive, and hurt someone, that’s a crime. Right? If an adult punched someone, the

news would report it, wouldn't they? And you've used violence before, haven't you?"

"That's… Fightin' and violence are two different things," answered Sudou.

"Well, I've never been violent in my life," said Yamauchi.

"But, Haruki, back in elementary school, didn't you once lick that girl's recorder? The girl you had a crush on? And you sniffed her gym clothes, too. Or did you *not* do those things?" pressed Ike.

"Ugh…" Yamauchi seemed to be recalling an unpleasant memory.

"If an adult did those same things? Crime!" shouted Ike.

"Th-that's true."

"In other words, it's different when it's another minor peeping on, and secretly photographing, girls without their knowledge. If we don't do this now, when can we?!"

His convincing rhetoric pierced Yamauchi and Sudou's hearts. It was enough to cleanse them of guilt over committing a criminal act.

"You in, Haruki? Let the chips fall where they may," asked Ike.

"Y-yeah. Okay, I'm on board," said Yamauchi.

"You guys sure about this? Seriously, it *is* illegal," I repeated.

No matter how much Ike tried to sugarcoat it, a crime was still a crime.

"Look, I've been saying this for a while now, Ayanokouji. Licking a flute is a crime, and directly peeping on someone changing clothes is also a crime. Secretly photographing someone without their knowledge is a crime. But this is what youth is for! Boys peeping on girls getting changed don't go to jail; we only get a warning. That's what I mean! You get it?" Ike repeated.

"I'm not interested," I replied.

"Still, you're cooperating. If you three form a wall, we definitely won't be spotted," said Ike.

He was really going to do this, even if I backed out.

“All right. I’ll cooperate. But promise me one thing, Ike. This plan is risky. If we’re caught, we’re going to get more than just a slap on the wrist. So, success or failure, promise me that Operation Delta is the only time you’ll try this. If you don’t, I won’t cooperate, and I might report it to the school, too.”

If I just flat-out objected, Ike and the others would carry out the crime regardless. By placing a condition on my offer to cooperate, I could ensure that this was a one-time event.

If we were discovered, Class D might actually come apart at the seams. We needed to understand that.

“All right already. I get it. I don’t think it’s good to try doing something like this multiple times, anyway,” Ike whined.

“That’s fortunate, because you’ll be staking your future high school career on this,” I replied. Then I added, “Let me suggest one thing. If the pool opens up at 9:00 A.M., then it’d be best to arrive right on time. If we get there first, nabbing the spot in the back of the locker room will be simple.”

“I see! Let’s go with that!” Ike agreed. “A red-blooded young man’s just gotta peep! Let’s do this, fellas!”

And that was the story behind Operation Delta.

7.1

On the day we went to the pool, we were the first people to enter the locker room. We went all the way to the back and spread out our towels. The boys who entered afterward were lost in their own conversations and paid us no attention.

"Hurry up, Ike," urged Sudou.

Sudou spread his towel and pretended to change while Ike crouched in front of the vent. Ike took out the RC car and screwdriver set that he'd wrapped in the towel and removed floor vent's metal fittings. He immediately put the RC car inside the vent and started operating it.

The RC car came equipped with a pen light. It rolled forward, transmitting footage of the path ahead, which the monitor displayed faintly.

"D-damn it! Just like I thought, it's dark!"

With only the pen light for illumination, the visibility on the monitor was getting worse. Even so, the RC car moved forward, little by little, toward the light that lay ahead. Even if we went too far, there were metal bars in place that would stop the car, so we weren't worried about it falling.

"All right, just a little farther!"

The monitor now displayed the locker room. Although the image quality was terrible, we could see Horikita and the others clearly.

"Wh-whoa!"

Ike's (or rather, the Professor's) plan had succeeded brilliantly. Class D students, as well as Ichinose, were visible. If we watched, we'd be able to see them changing in real time.

"Hey, show me too, Kanji. I can't see it at all, dude!"

"You idiot! Show me, too!"

Sudou and Yamauchi kept up their demands. At this rate,

there was no way we'd avoid drawing suspicion.

"You can record this, right? Isn't it better not to push your luck? People are gonna get suspicious," I warned.

"D-damn, you're right. I guess, right now, it's better for us to just get changed," muttered Yamauchi. He clicked his tongue and grimaced in frustration. Even if we didn't peep through the monitor, the memory card was recording and storing everything.

Ike manfully endured the temptation. He put the remote control in his locker and focused on changing.

"H-how many minutes should I wait, I wonder?" he asked.

"I'd like to keep it there for twenty minutes, at the very least."

If we pulled the car too quickly, we wouldn't see the girls changing. On the other hand, if we took too long changing, that might arouse suspicion. This would undoubtedly be the longest twenty minutes of these guys' entire lives.

"I'll go on ahead," I told them.

"W-wait a minute, Ayanokouji! Are you betraying us?! If you ask us to show you afterward, we're not going to!" snapped Ike.

"That's not it at all. If twenty minutes pass without a single guy coming out of the locker room, the girls will get suspicious."

"Ugh. Yeah, I guess you're probably right. Okay, do a good job out there."

"Got it."

Leaving the other three guys to recover the RC car, I went ahead toward the pool.

7.2

At the exact same time that I left the men's locker room, something happened in the girls' area. It was the kind of spectacle those three idiots longed to see. The camera recorded all the sounds and images.

"This is kind of neat, isn't it? Using the school pool outside of class, I mean," said Kushida, putting her bag in her locker.

Ichinose, who was changing right next to Kushida, quickly grabbed her clothes. "Yeah. It feels kind of like when you go to the public pool just to goof off," she replied.

"Ichinose-san, you have such an amazing figure. You're so well-proportioned," said Kushida, sighing as if lovestruck.

Ichinose, seeming a little embarrassed, looked over at Kushida. "You have a great figure too, Kushida-san. I wouldn't compare us."

Ichinose clearly won in terms of chest size, but Kushida could hold her own. Meanwhile, Sakura kept her distance from the other two as she started changing. Even being around other girls made her deeply self-conscious. Unlike in swim class, though, her salvation was the rash guard that would completely hide her upper body.

"Ichinose-san, could you please not stare at me?" said Horikita, noticing Ichinose's passionate gaze.

"Oh, sorry, sorry! It's just… How do I put it? Your skin is so flawless and clear, Horikita-san. I was entranced. I thought I'd admire a cute girl, as a fellow girl, you know? Kikyou-chan, you agree with me, right?" asked Ichinose.

"Yeah, Horikita-san is really cute," replied Kushida.

"……"

Horikita resumed changing with a beleaguered sigh.

"You know, you *did* come out with us today. I didn't think you'd be interested in something like this," said Ichinose.

“I’m not here because I like this kind of thing. Sometimes you just have to grin and bear it, regardless of your wishes,” said Horikita.

“Hmm? That’s kind of confusing, Horikita-san.”

Naturally, Horikita couldn’t tell anyone how Ayanokouji had called in a favor to make her come along. She would take the humiliation of trapping her arm in a water bottle to her grave.

“Why don’t you try changing without talking to me?” she retorted, instead of explaining her comment.

Rejected by Horikita, Ichinose looked around for her next target. She sighted Sakura, sneakily hiding in the back of the locker room.

Even though Ichinose wasn’t familiar with Class D’s internal politics, she could easily tell that Sakura needed gentle handling. Ichinose wouldn’t push enough to make her uncomfortable, but didn’t want to completely ignore her, either. Sakura might be shy, but Ichinose was sure she could open up to people she came to trust over time. If that were true, Ichinose could eventually become friends with Sakura as well.

“It’s been a while since we last met, hasn’t it, Sakura-san? I suppose, since we’re from different classes, we don’t run into each other all that often,” said Ichinose.

“Y-yeah, I suppose so,” replied Sakura.

“Honami-chan, you already know Sakura-san? That’s surprising,” said Kushida, feeling doubtful of the relationship between Sakura and Ichinose.

“We know each other from a while back. Right?” said Ichinose.

“Y-yes,” said Sakura, looking more rigid than expected. She avoided eye contact while she spoke.

Ichinose gave Sakura’s body a quick glance, without staring too openly. Sakura’s facial features really were cute. She was slender, but still had some meat on her bones, and her breasts looked like something you’d see on a magazine model.

With those looks, Sakura could probably have become the most popular girl in the school if she’d just been a little more outgoing.

“That reminds me, Honami-chan. You were with Kanzaki-kun

today, too. Could I ask you a little about that?" said Kushida.

"Huh? What about Kanzaki-kun?" replied Ichinose.

Sakura, recognizing that this was her chance to escape, shifted away from Ichinose.

"Well, a girl in our class is interested in Kanzaki-kun. I wanted to ask you a few things," said Kushida.

"Wow. Kanzaki-kun is surprisingly popular. Girls in our class seem to like him, too. But I don't think he's dating anyone right now," said Ichinose.

"I see. In that case, I think I'll tell her to call him."

"Yeah, yeah. Kanzaki-kun will like that, I think. Probably."

"Why 'probably'?" Kushida laughed at getting such a vague answer.

"He's a man of few words, you know? Which is fine, I suppose, but he completely lacks assertiveness. I don't understand him well," added Ichinose.

"I see. I guess he is hard to interpret, isn't he?"

At that point, Ichinose seemed to notice that everyone else was almost done changing. "Whoa, we need to catch up!"

She started pulling her clothes off quickly, without grace, as if she were a boy. Her breasts jiggled. Even Horikita, who was trying not to show any interest, shifted her attention for a moment.

"When did you get those breasts?"

"Huh? You mean, when did they get big? I guess in my third year of junior high. They just kept growing bigger and bigger. Why?" asked Ichinose.

"Oh, I understand. That must be why you don't know what to do with them." If Ichinose had developed rapidly, in under a year, it was no wonder that she still hadn't adjusted to her body's changes.

Ichinose finished putting on her swimsuit and grabbed her locker key. "All right! All done changing!" she shouted at the other girls lagging behind. "I'm going on ahead!"

Ichinose left at a run, her excitement to get to the pool clearly bubbling over.

“She’s like a human typhoon, isn’t she?” said Horikita. She was neither praising nor criticizing Ichinose, just making an observation.

Horikita wasn’t speaking to anyone in particular, but Kushida responded. “When Ichinose-san is around, everyone seems to smile.”

Horikita glanced briefly at Kushida, but didn’t answer. Meanwhile, Kushida’s attention shifted to someone who’d just entered the locker room.

“Oh, Karuizawa-san? Good morning! You came here to hang out?” asked Ichinose.

“What a coincidence! We’re here to swim, too.” Kushida couldn’t hide her surprise. Karuizawa almost never swam during class.

“Heh.”

With that brief response, Karuizawa and the two girls who entered with her headed toward the lockers all the way in the back of the room. She touched the grating across the vent, and it came off without much effort. That wasn’t due to her superhuman strength. Someone had entered the locker room yesterday and carefully unfastened all the screws with a Philips screwdriver.

“Ugh. They’re seriously doing it. These guys are the lowest of the low—complete perverts,” Karuizawa muttered.

She found the RC car up against the vent opening. Its camera’s gleaming lens captured the girls’ locker room at an excellent angle. The light next to the monitor glowed a faint red, which meant the camera was in the middle of recording.

Doing as Ayanokouji had instructed her ahead of time, Karuizawa removed the memory card. She replaced it with a new memory card with no data, and put the car back in the vent.

“That takes care of that.” Soon, the RC car would return to its owner. “He’s the only one who really…”

As exasperated as Karuizawa was by the guys’ grossness, her thoughts turned to the only person who acted to stop them from carrying the plan out: Ayanokouji. If Ayanokouji hadn’t done something, her classmates, and even girls from other classes,

would've had their naked bodies seen without their knowledge. Even worse, those images would've been saved forever.

"Kei-chan, is everything okay?"

Sonada, Karuizawa's classmate, spoke behind her. Ishikura, the third girl, also looked at Karuizawa with an uneasy expression.

"Ah, yeah. Thanks. I'm good now."

Karuizawa had used her friends to shield herself from view as she bent down to the vent, just like the guys had done in the other locker room. She'd even procured the keys to all the nearby lockers beforehand, so people would see them marked as full, and not use them. Now, Karuizawa calmly and carefully returned those keys one by one, taking care not to look too nervous.

She didn't explain what she was doing to her friends. They were people who obediently followed instructions without requiring explanations. They were not strong-willed, and they feared being ostracized. Karuizawa kept such people around on purpose.

After she finished changing, and confirmed that no other Class D students were around, Karuizawa thanked the girls she was with.

"I have a little business to take care of later. Will you two be here?"

"Ah, yeah. We were thinking of swimming. Right?"

7.3

After swimming to the point of exhaustion, I left the pool and went back to my room. When I arrived, three excited guys were waiting in front of my door.

"You're late, Ayanokouji! Hurry up and let us in!" Sudou, his patience gone, kicked my door. That would only annoy my neighbors and draw the dorm manager's attention.

"Hurry up, Ayanokouji!"

I opened the door. A bunch of guys unable to contain their arousal pushed it from behind. Ike held the memory card he'd recovered from the RC car. On that memory card were images of the girls changing—or so the guys thought, anyway.

Pushing ahead of me, they turned on my computer without permission.

"I-If there are some incredible pictures, let me copy them."

"Wait, guys. First, I need to confirm somethin'. You guys don't got any right to see Suzune's naked body."

"Calm down, you two. We're all in this together. Heh heh heh!"

They no longer paid any mind to me, impatiently waiting for the computer to turn on. Since it'd been an exhausting day, I sat down on my bed.

"If you could give that back to me after checking the contents, it would be a big help," I told them.

"The hell, Ayanokouji? What are you trying to be all mature for? You want to see, too, right?"

"If you want to turn back, now's the time," I warned them.

"Ah, I get it. Well, if you're going to act like a good little boy, you definitely shouldn't look. Heh. Or maybe I'm just not going to show you," said Ike. He stood in front of the computer screen, arms outstretched as if to block it from view.

“Ain’t no guy alive who’s not excited about seeing a naked woman. Be honest,” said Sudou, already relaxing, as if this were his room. I didn’t really feel any need to go to such lengths to look at a naked woman, however. It wasn’t worth risking expulsion, at the very least.

“Huh?! Wh-why-why is nothing there?!” screamed Ike.

The computer loaded the data from the Professor’s memory card—only there wasn’t any data saved on it. The RC car had never recorded properly.

“N-nothing. The data…”

“Wait, that can’t be true. I-I mean, it was recording, right? Right?”

The three clicked on the folder, opening it over and over in a panic. There was no data, though. Karuizawa had taken out the real memory card, and replaced it with an empty one. No matter how hard the guys looked, they couldn’t find a file that didn’t exist.

“Why isn’t it *there* ?!” shouted Ike.

And with that, an act of sabotage annihilated the ambitions of those three idiots.

Postscript

Hey, it's been four months! Kinugasa here.

I sneakily attended a recent party for some game industry people. When I was there, a company president greeted me. He said, "Kinugasa-san, I played your games back when I was a student!" That certainly made me feel the passage of time.

Yeah, let's not think about that too deeply.

This book depicts the events that transpired at the end of summer vacation, after the test's conclusion back in Volume Four. It sort of sets the stage for Volume Five with the appearance of some new characters. I put a swimsuit scene in the main story, and got some amazing fanservice with the illustrations! Unfortunately, as a result, my editor also rebuked me.

The group of girls surrounding Ayanokouji is becoming more pronounced. Maybe one of them (or even a character to be introduced later) will develop a more romantic relationship with Ayanokouji.

Starting in the next volume, we'll finally learn something about Ayanokouji's past. With the emergence of new rivals, and a new special exam, the situation will become more chaotic. There are students who want to reach the top by working with their classmates. There are those who want to win by themselves, relying on their own power. Finally, there are those who use others to get ahead. These three kinds of characters will begin to reveal themselves as the story progresses.

Also, the first volume of the *Classroom of the Elite* manga is now on sale! My heart is pounding, since Volume 4.5 of the light novel is on sale at the same time. I'm going to buy a minimum of three books! One for reading, one to display on my shelf, and one to preserve!

I am extremely grateful to you, Yuyu-sama and Ichino-sama. There were only men in the manga's first volume, which must have made it a tough job, but all the illustrations were exceptional.

Perhaps you resent me because, with Tomoseshunsaku-sama, I'm putting in more and more beautiful female characters? Please channel that resentment into drawing more attractive, uncouth male characters (blargh). I look forward to continuing our collaboration on the manga!

Oh, and lastly, there are actually a few bonus stories after this postscript. What's the true motive behind Ayanokouji's mysterious actions? The three idiots' terrifying plan is revealed!

Author:
Syougo Kinugasa

Born in November. Blood type AB. Primarily responsible for PC game development. Most notable works: *Guards of Daybreak, Reminiscence* .

Although he's based in Fukuoka, the possibility of moving to Tokyo has emerged. However, he's a resolute Hanshin fan.

Illustrator:
Tomoseshunsaku

Born in September. Lead animator and illustrator for the *Sagittarius* games. Lead animator for *Guards of Daybreak, Reminiscence* , etc.

Laughs scornfully at friends, saying, "You still play *Pokémon GO* ?" But…he still plays *Pokémon GO*.

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